

American Authenticity and the Modern Western, 1962-1984

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Declaration of Authorship

I Timothy Hughes hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own.
Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

The West has long been conceived in American culture as the site of an elusive ideal of authenticity. This thesis aims to define the concept of American Authenticity as a political philosophy, affective current, and 'structure of feeling' which finds expression within the Hollywood western, in order to conduct a cultural history and immanent critique of the genre during its most vibrant and conflicted period. Focussing predominantly on post-classical or revisionist westerns from the genre's modernist moment in the late studio era to its precipitous decline at the end of the so-called Hollywood Renaissance, this thesis argues that shifting notions of authenticity offer a key to understanding the relation between a diverse body of generic texts, their immediate contemporary social, cultural and political contexts, and longstanding traditions in American intellectual culture. Tracing the origins of American Authenticity back to the transcendentalists in American literature, this thesis argues that during intense periods of modernisation or historical crisis American culture becomes preoccupied with ideas of authenticity, normally located in the West and in the past, as an effect of contemporary anxieties. This thesis uses the western boom of the Hollywood Renaissance in the 1960s and 1970s to explore shifting notions of authenticity in American culture across this period: from the civil rights movement and the early New Left, to the popular counterculture, to the traumatic events at the end of the 1960s, and the aftermath of the 1970s. Analysing some of the period's most important and widely discussed films alongside minor or neglected works, this thesis goes on to examine the decline of the genre in the late 1970s alongside the fundamental challenges posed to traditional ideas of authenticity in postmodernism.

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Introduction

‘The West of which I speak is but another name for the Authentic’ (Lewis, 2003:6).

The pursuit of authenticity, in all its meanings and associations, lies at the very heart of the history of thought and artistic expression about the American West. As Nathaniel Lewis states above, paraphrasing Henry David Thoreau, the deep relation between the West and notions of authenticity constitutes ‘the perennial philosophy of western literature’ (2003:7). The West is conceived as the site of an elusive ideal of authenticity – an imaginary space where authentic ways of living are cast in opposition to contemporary life – while simultaneously, American culture seeks to strip away layers of accumulated myths and ideas and uncover some buried or forgotten real West. The search for authenticity therefore, in the broadest sense of the term, motivates cultural investment in two seemingly incompatible regions: the West of the imagination, and the West of lived social and historical actuality. ‘There are few terms in the history of this vast region,’ write Handley and Lewis, ‘that have as wide a reach and relevance, and there is no other region in America that is as haunted by the elusive appeal, legitimating power, and nostalgic pull of authenticity’ (2004:1). Handley and Lewis draw comparisons to Walter Benjamin’s notion of the ‘aura’ – the singular originality of the work of art before the age of mechanical reproduction – in that authenticity is typically realised only as the recognition of its obsolescence; the ‘aura’ is defined only when it becomes impossible to experience. Authenticity similarly emerges out of the recognition of *inauthenticity*, as ‘an effect of desire, an effect of loss, or an effect of displacement’ (2004:1). The concept of authenticity in relation to the American West, therefore it is as revealing about contemporary anxieties, desires and dilemmas as it is about the historical frontier. The further Americans were removed from the historical actuality of the frontier, the more it seemed to represent an ideal state of being, a solution to the existential and physical hardships of increasingly mechanised urban lives; something vital and real, yet always

desperately unattainable and drifting further into the past. Yet despite the importance of the concept to cultures of the American West, authenticity has not yet been the subject of scholarly work on the Hollywood western.

This thesis seeks to define the concept of authenticity in American culture in order to conduct a cultural history and immanent critique of the Hollywood western during its most vibrant and conflicted period, beginning in 1962 ‘the year that marks the end of the full flowering of the western’ (Corkin, 2004:2), and ending in 1984, the first year in Hollywood history in which no westerns were released. The intervening years constitute the last period in which the western can be regarded as a major feature of American film culture, a long generic crisis, running from the western’s modernist moment in the late studio era, to its precipitous decline at the end of the so-called Hollywood Renaissance. Exploring the construction of shifting notions of authenticity both from a wide perspective in American culture, and through the close-analysis of individual texts, I aim to offer new insights into the relation between the western and its contemporary social, cultural, political contexts, and alongside longstanding currents in intellectual culture.

I do not intend to offer a comprehensive survey of the nearly five hundred films produced during the final boom of the western as a popular genre, nor an analysis of a particular strain or sub-genre. As notions of authenticity are inherent in the genre’s most basic semantic elements, narrative conventions, and thematic meanings – for instance, the question of authentic violence outside of institutions of law and justice, the pursuit of authentic nature and escape from inauthentic urban modernity, the idea of an authentic nation, the struggle to be true to one’s values – the approach to genre adopted in this thesis could be rewardingly applied not only to westerns produced between 1962 and 1984, but also to silent and classical studio era westerns. At the risk of generalising about such a large body of films, I would suggest that American Authenticity is present in the classical western as a set of assumptions, or a thematic undercurrent, rather than a central preoccupation. That is not to say that authenticity lay dormant until the so-called Hollywood Renaissance of the late-1960s and 1970s, but rather that the complexly interrelated industrial, social, political, and cultural crises and era-defining events of the period snapped the concept into focus; that authenticity is especially evident in the films in this period owing to a wider cultural engagement with the concept. Indeed, as I

demonstrate in Chapter One with an analysis of two major John Ford westerns, *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), authenticity emerges by the early 1960s as an unresolvable *problem* within the western. As such the films chosen for close analysis have been selected for their different perspectives on and engagement with the problem of authenticity running throughout the genre as a whole, and for their expression of notions of authenticity in relation to social and political history and contemporary national mood. In analysing critically and commercially successful works by major auteurs of the period such as Sam Peckinpah, Arthur Penn, Sydney Pollack, and Clint Eastwood alongside cult or neglected films, and routine or ordinary genre productions, this thesis draws upon a wide-ranging and representative sample, demonstrating how the approach adopted here might be deployed in other eras or to an entirely different set of films. This thesis includes films commonly designated revisionist, alongside more traditional films that would not have looked out of place in the studio area and films which lie outside of strict generic definitions such as western-inflected road movies, films set in the post-World War Two West, contemporary rodeo westerns, and one experimental film about the production of a Hollywood western. Reference is also made throughout to other forms of western representation of the period – literature, painting, and popular music – in which the heightened pursuit of authenticity is also visible.

Hollywood westerns that most evidently pursue, express, dramatize, or attempt to represent the authentic tend to be characterised – for reasons that become clear as we define and explore the artistic and intellectual history of the concept in American culture – by an affective tenor of nostalgia or melancholy, and as such this thesis gives special attention to films working within an elegiac or tragic mode, films which refuse the resolution or affirmation we might expect from classical studio westerns. It is for this reason that this study somewhat privileges the work of Hollywood Renaissance auteurs, whose work is more likely to be characterised by a complex relation to U.S. history and the myth of the frontier, and an engagement with contemporary social and political contexts. It is for this reason also that the television western is omitted from this study; not only does the heyday of the television western belong to an earlier era, declining rapidly from 1962 onwards and experiencing nothing like the boom in production enjoyed by the film western between 1965-1976 (Fig. A)¹, but

the family appeal and affirmative narrative and thematic conventions of many television westerns are not conducive to a concern with authenticity.

In Chapter One, I review the role authenticity has played in the history of western genre criticism, suggesting reasons for its absence as methodological tool, but to begin it is worth considering that despite the importance of the term to the West, its very elusiveness as a concept makes it difficult to deploy in a theoretically grounded manner. As a problem in modern European philosophy, writes Jacob Golomb in *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus*, authenticity ‘signifies something beyond the domain of objective language’ (1995:7). Lionel Trilling, distinguishing authenticity from the notion of sincerity from which it develops, and not coincidentally writing in the very period with which this thesis is principally concerned, similarly suggests that the word ‘comes so readily to the tongue these days and in so many connections that it may well resist [...] efforts of definition’ (1972:11). The challenge therefore is to devise a working definition of the concept within a specific culture, offering fixed co-ordinates as it were, within which the ephemeral intangibility and constant shifts of the concept can be understood.

Chapter One works towards defining and tracing the origins and development of what I will term ‘American Authenticity’, that is, the specifically American cultural preoccupation with authenticity which finds special resonance in the West, and has the western genre as its privileged vehicle. At the beginning of the chapter, I describe the unlikely connection between William “Buffalo Bill” Cody, Eadweard Muybridge, and Fredrick Jackson Turner at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893 in order to explain the development and articulation of the concept in mass culture. The latter half of Chapter One aims to define the emergence of authenticity in relation to American modernization, comparing American Authenticity to traditions in European Romanticism from which it emerged. In particular I emphasise Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s thought on authenticity – a decidedly pessimistic and nostalgic ideal of the unified self, living closer to nature forged in response to the perceived inauthenticity of the modern world – as a forerunner to the conception of authenticity in nineteenth century America. Drawing upon the work of Marshall Berman, who defines the authenticity, or his synonymous phrase ‘radical individualism’, as an oppositional response to the experience of rapidly modernizing societies, and Charles Taylor, who suggests that the perceived ‘malaises’ of modernity

give rise to cultural preoccupation with authenticity, Chapter One traces the intellectual history of authenticity and proposes a model for studying the expression of the concept within specific cultures as a key to understanding the anxieties of the times.² The key to distinguishing a distinctively American concept of the authentic from both mainstream Romanticism and from related concepts such as alienation and totality within European Marxist thought, I suggest lies in the intellectual movement of American transcendentalism, particularly in the work of Henry David Thoreau. In Thoreau's thought about the self, nature, and the ravages of intense and destructive modernity, mainstream American individualism and Romantic thought about nature are subverted into an oppositional political philosophy inspired by and projected onto the American West.

The first chapter works towards a definition of American Authenticity as a political philosophy and affective current, journeying through American culture while being shaped by contemporary social and historical forces, and finding continual expression within the western. As a starting point, American Authenticity might be gathered together and understood as a generic concept along the same lines as Fredric Jameson's 'ideologeme'. Writing about the salvation or utopian possibilities offered by the romance genre, Jameson defines the 'ideologeme' as 'a historically determinate conceptual or semic complex which can project itself in the form of a "value system" or "philosophical concept," or in the form of a protonarrative, a private or collective narrative fantasy' (2002:102). Constituting something like the 'essence' of a genre, the 'ideologeme' helps us to understand the active response of the text to its objective historical situation, as a more dynamic conception of the relation between genre and wider social contexts than mere reflection or duplication. The study of American Authenticity as an 'ideologeme' of the western allows, in Jameson's terms, for 'the coordination of immanent formal analysis of the individual text with the twin diachronic perspective of the history of forms and the evolution of social life' (2002:92).

Apprehending the social and political function of a genre therefore depends upon the historicisation of the individual text and a conception of the historicity of the genre. This thesis stresses the essential historicity of the form of the western – which genre criticism has tended to reduce, as I discuss in the literature review, to its basic Proppian structure or the purely mythic – and at points I refer to a redoubled historicity within the genre; this is intended not as a separate category,

but rather as an intensification or foregrounding of historicity within exceptionally historically conscious westerns (for instance films involving metahistorical reflection through the use of flashbacks, ellipses, or framing devices).

The main difference, perhaps, between the ‘ideologeme’ of western genre compared to the romance genre, is that the resolution of contradictions is located in the past and therefore tainted with a characteristic nostalgia or melancholy. Similar to Raymond Williams’s notion of ‘structures of feeling’, the value of a concept like American Authenticity lies in bringing together the social, political, and affective dimensions of a genre at once. American Authenticity might be understood as a specific ‘structure of feeling’ in American culture, comprised of formal concepts like world-view or ideology, but including ‘meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt’ (Williams, 1977:132). The search for authenticity might arise in response to concrete social and historical circumstances and be defined in terms of ‘formal or systemic beliefs,’ but it must also be understood through its phenomenological dimensions, as a feeling, desire, or mood. As Robert Pippin writes, ‘westerns address the fundamental problems of political philosophy arising from rapid modernisation,’ but the vitality of the genre lies in its capacity to ‘explore the psychological and first person experiential dimensions of political life’ (2010:16).

American Authenticity as a ‘structure of feeling’, then, emerges as a lived experiential response to objective conditions, snapped into focus and motivated by historical conjunctures. ‘The quest for authenticity,’ writes Golomb, ‘becomes especially pronounced in extreme situations’ including both personal and historical crises (1995:3). As an ideal authenticity is less readily defined intrinsically as it is negatively, through the recognition of the inauthenticity and alienation – often located in an image of encroaching urban modernity with attendant bureaucratization, mechanization and spatial restriction – to which it reacts. Charles Taylor argues that authenticity is generated as a response to the ‘features of our culture and society that people experience as a loss or decline’ (1991:1). It follows that the ‘structure of feeling’ that this thesis pursues, while often ideologically ambiguous or incoherent, is in the broadest sense oppositional, reacting against a perceived loss of authenticity in contemporary society.

Whether defined as a ‘ideologeme’ or ‘structure of feeling’, American Authenticity is certainly a philosophical concept, and in exploring this concept in relation the modern western, this thesis is partly working within the discipline of film and philosophy. Yet the aim is not simply to demonstrate how certain films might be illustrative of well-established issues within philosophy (for instance, the problem of authenticity and inauthenticity in existentialism), but rather to explore how the narrative form, visual style, and thematic content of a wide range of films made within a particular genre might be understood to raise philosophical questions and dramatize philosophical problems.³ One could go further and suggest, like Daniel Frampton’s idea of ‘filmosophy’ that offering more than simply a ‘catalogue of philosophical problems’, films offer a kind of ‘organic intelligence’ engaged in thinking through film form, style, characters, subjects, and so forth (2006:6-8). Rather than showing how westerns illustrate philosophical arguments, or how a philosophical argument might help us to understand the meaning of a film, westerns could be conceived as actively thinking through, dramatizing, and showing, the problems and possibilities of American Authenticity. It could be objected that this approach risks imposing predefined meanings that the film cannot support on its own, which is why in Chapter One I define American Authenticity *through* the problems of political philosophy articulated in John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* in particular, and through the epistemology of the western genre as a whole. American Authenticity is not intended as a reductive master-theme or replacement for the western’s well-established interpretations, for instance, along the lines of national identity, masculinity, ideology, the conflict between urban and natural environments, violence and morality, but rather as complementary concept which relates to all of these sometimes isolated themes.

The story of how authenticity became such a vital theme and problem in American culture of the late 1960s and 1970s that will be focus of this study begins in the cultural and intellectual undercurrents of the fifties, and develops throughout the early sixties at the height of the civil rights movement and the emergence of the New Left. Authenticity is a common thread that runs through a diverse range of oppositional culture and thought, from concerns about the loss of individualism in the conformity and consensus of the Eisenhower years, to the search for genuine self-expression in the Beat and jazz movements, to the calls for a return to more authentic ways of living in the folk revival,

and the demands for representation, rights and freedom in the civil rights movement. In all these cases, as in the late sixties counterculture, authenticity is invented as a by-product of critique, as a negative image of the anxieties of the times, one which usually resembles – however perversely – traditional American ideals. The meaning of this elusive by-product and image therefore depends greatly upon that which it is directed against.

The nature or meaning of authenticity might be contested and constantly shifting, but its value is rarely questioned; if there is no agreement on the constitution of the concept, it is embraced nonetheless as something self-evidently good. Even in the multifarious uses of the term in everyday language, ‘authentic’ is unlikely to be used in a pejorative sense. It is instructive therefore to begin with Theodor Adorno’s critique of Heidegger and the tradition of twentieth century German existential philosophy in *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964). Although focused on a very different context – how the language of German philosophy helped support the rise of fascism – Adorno’s critique of the jargon (with ‘authenticity’ being but the most privileged among a glut of popularised existential terminology) nonetheless extends to the language of advertising, bureaucracies, the culture industry, and can be adapted to apply to American culture and Hollywood.

Adorno suggests that the jargon promotes a radical inwardness which claims to overcome alienation outside of any objective social context, retreating behind a transcendental philosophy that promises to transform even the direst of historical circumstances. Adorno’s critique exposes the jargon as carrying the residue of religious language, the positing of an ontological transcendent self or essence (as opposed to the self being a euphemistic term for a consciousness biologically predicated, socially constructed, and constantly shifting) fostering the weight and certainty of religious thought without doctrine or specific content. A Benjaminian ‘aura’ emanates from words like ‘authenticity,’ ‘self,’ or ‘encounter’ suggesting deep meaningfulness without the need for specific content. The danger, Adorno argues, is that such language, far from producing any genuine autonomy, generates a generic uniformity of individuals who have merely been lent a false sense of purpose and therefore might be easily coerced; that the illusion of inner totality provides the ideal cover for totalitarianism, or that ‘the formal gesture of autonomy replaces the content of autonomy’ (2003:13).

At the heart of Adorno's critique of authenticity is a suspicion of the yearning for some imagined folk-ish past that is its most common form: 'Expressions and situations, drawn from a no longer existent daily life, are forever being blown up as if they were empowered and guaranteed by some absolute which is kept silent out of reverence' (2003:7). Heidegger's appeal for the rootedness of agrarian country living, his 'thinking through outmoded language,' anti-urban celebration of loneliness, and attempts to lend philosophy a primalness by association with the 'sixth-hand symbol of the farmer' and a folk-art vision of nature left-over from romanticism, are unmasked as superficial and hollow gestures (2003:43-5). This jargon of rural nostalgia Adorno allies throughout with the reactionary modernism of Nazism.

One should be cautious not to directly transpose, from German philosophy to American culture more generally, the idea that the language of authenticity supports the development of the fascist state (though Adorno certainly encouraged such a comparison). But the more general point, that the concept of authenticity is necessarily ideological is an important one, and in an American context raises the question of why, in the culture of the most aggressively and consistently individualist and capitalist nation, autonomy and individuality should be constantly conceived as being threatened, under duress, or altogether lost. Either culture simply imagines the loss of its most valued characteristics as an affirmative reflex – as a reminder not to take the present system for granted – or alternatively culture uncovers, perhaps unwittingly, the contradictions and falsehoods of these values, stripping away the facade and mourning the absence uncovered. As a part of the culture industry Adorno understands cinema as reproducing mainstream ideology, 'reinforcing the phenomenal surface of society' (1991:157) and functioning as an advertisement for itself, but he allows that in its attempts to manipulate the masses 'the ideology of the culture industry itself becomes as internally antagonistic as the very society which it aims to control,' and that it 'contains the antidote to its own lie' (1991:157).

The parallels between the language of authenticity in German philosophy and its American cousin are straightforward: both cultures imagine some ideal state of being resides in a lapsed way of living more simply and in tune with nature, both dwell on the absolute integrity and individuality of the subject, and both resurrect romantic or folk-ish forms of expression as the solution to modern

anxieties. However, the German *Volk* myth is not equivalent to the American frontier myth. The distinctive character of American Authenticity is formed by the fact that modernization in the West was not a change in society, but the construction of (non-indigenous white) society itself. The authentic ideal in America is therefore not one of reactionary regression to a traditional, pre-, or early modern society, but rather an imaginative space more directly related to anxieties about intense modernization. American Authenticity is therefore marked by its historical consciousness – preoccupied as it is with the tipping point of a relatively recent process of modernization – as opposed to the ahistorical fantasy of the agrarian hazy life Adorno criticises in German existentialism. Adorno even uses the American example to disprove the historicity of Heidegger’s claim that “Man tries in vain to bring the globe to order through planning, when he is not in tune with the consoling voice of the country lane,” stating simply that, ‘North America knows no country lanes, not even villages’ (2003:45). As a more historically grounded concept, American Authenticity also avoids the unequivocal fantasy of the German *Volk* tradition; the individualism of the frontier is insistently ‘rugged,’ with hardship and violence seldom going unacknowledged and undiluted idealism rarely permitted.

Adorno’s critique of the jargon of authenticity provides a convincing counterpoint to the popular cultural and intellectual embrace of the concept in the sixties. However, the jargon is largely a linguistic critique, about the deployment of words imbued with meaningfulness without content; the expression of authenticity in cinema must be explored in relation to the resources of the medium.⁴ A similar method of immanent critique that Adorno applies to German philosophy can be applied to cinema: closely examining the structure and meaning of a film can in turn uncover its contradictions and ideological basis and contextualise the film as a product of historical process.

Chapter Two explores the vectors of authenticity in the political and social upheavals of the 1960s, from the civil rights movement and the incipient New Left to the growth of the popular counterculture and the traumatic events at the close of the decade. In Chapter Two, I argue that the simmering concern with authenticity in post-war literary and intellectual culture becomes in the social upheavals of the sixties, a popular cultural obsession, becoming the explicit goal and foremost ideal within the civil rights movement, the folk revival, the early New Left, and indeed, the early New

Right. In the early 1960s the propensity for American culture to invent another America, a mirage-like nation of ‘participatory democracy,’ freedom, and wildness, projected onto the West, definitively absent yet somehow more ‘real’ than the United States, reaches its zenith. Throughout the chapter I discuss how this rapidly shifting narrative of authenticity in American culture offers a key to understanding Hollywood westerns from the generic recession which helped produce the genre’s modernist moment in 1962 to the diverse and conflicted western boom of the Hollywood Renaissance. Beginning with the contrasting generational and ideological conceptions of American Authenticity represented by John Wayne in *True Grit* (1969) and Dennis Hopper in *Easy Rider* (1969), I go on to examine how authenticity becomes bound up with the creation of a hypothetical ‘America’ cast in opposition to contemporary life in the United States, and to explore the importance of the West within the counterculture. The chapter builds towards an in-depth discussion of *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *The Last Movie* (1971), both representing the high watermark of the critical engagement with the western in the Hollywood Renaissance, and articulating an intensely problematic, tragic, near-apocalyptic conception of authenticity.

Chapters Three and Four each explore the shifting meaning of American Authenticity in the immediate aftermath of the sixties and throughout the seventies and cover the significant changes within the genre during the remainder of the Hollywood Renaissance. Chapter Three discusses the ‘inward turn’ of the seventies as a retreat from actively political conceptions of authenticity, emphasising the distinctive treatment of space in generic cycles without conventional western protagonists. Two Mountain Man westerns, *Man In The Wilderness* (1971) and *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972) are considered in relation to the value placed on wilderness by the counterculture, changing conceptions of the self in the ‘Me-decade’, and longstanding propensity for solipsistic or anti-social retreat in American culture. The identification of Native Americans as vessels for authenticity, from traditional tropes of the Noble Savage, to contemporary countercultural appropriation and Native American activism, is examined through *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* (1969) and *Little Big Man* (1970).

Chapter Four seeks to understand how the genre confronts its own decline, focusing on two cycles of ‘post-westerns’ which respond to dramatic social, political, and economic changes in the

landscape of the contemporary New West. From the melancholy rodeo cowboys of *J.W. Coop* and *Junior Bonner* (1972) to the restored Reaganite heroes of *Bronco Billy* and *Urban Cowboy* (1980), the chapter considers how the ‘post-western’ confronts the incongruousness of the anachronistic cowboy’s pursuit of authenticity within enclosed arenas against the backdrop of a transformed West. This thesis concludes by describing the challenges posed to traditional notions of authenticity in a postmodern culture. At the moment the western disappeared temporarily from the genre map, Frederic Jameson discussed the dialectic of authenticity and inauthenticity as one of the key ‘depth models’ or themes within modernism to which the ‘cultural dominant’ of postmodernism is opposed (1991:14). Considering *Heaven’s Gate* (1980) as representative of both the pursuit of authenticity in the Hollywood Renaissance and the reification and aestheticisation of authenticity in postmodernism, I suggest reasons for the marginalisation of the western in the early 1980s and offer a prognosis for the future of authenticity as vital and hitherto uncharted ‘structure of feeling’ in American culture.

Chapter One:

Adventures of Authenticity

Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free. Thither no business leads me. It is hard for me to believe that I shall find fair landscapes, or sufficient wildness and freedom behind the Eastern horizon – Henry David Thoreau, ‘Walking’ (2006:80)

Men are free when they belong to a believing community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled perhaps unrealized purpose. Not when they are escaping to some Wild West. The most unfree souls go West, and shout freedom. Men are freest when they are most unconscious of freedom. The shout is always a rattling of chains, always was – D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1971:12)

Cody, Muybridge and Turner at the Fair

In May 1893 the first of some twenty million visitors poured down the Midway Plaisance on the Southeast side of Chicago and into the World’s Columbian Exposition, designed to mark the four hundredth anniversary of white settlement on the North American continent, while announcing the culmination of American modernity, and the arrival of the United States on the global stage. Leaving the smoke and bustle of America’s booming and vertically inclined metropolis, visitors passed through an array of exotic attractions before entering the White City, a serene and meticulously ordered landscape of neo-classical grandeur, with imperious columns and domes surrounded by elegant promenades and still lagoons. Dazzlingly illuminated with electric light and exhibiting the cutting edge of technological innovation, the World’s Fair provided an emphatic statement that America, having survived the trials of Civil War and indigenous resistance and overcome nature’s obstacles, was an enviable pinnacle of modern civilization.⁵

Designed to mark Chicago prominently on the map of the United States and America on the globe, the World's Fair was a forceful and federally backed riposte to famous expositions in London and Paris. Yet this boastful gesture towards the old world was also an imitative one. The hurriedly constructed White City resembled a plaster-cast model of European civilization; a prefabricated simulacrum of ancient permanence and grandeur: Imperial Rome in Illinois or Paris on Lake Michigan. Rejecting the national images of pioneers living in constant motion across the landscape, as well as the distinctively functional character of American cities epitomised by the Chicago school of architecture, the Columbian Exposition announced the equivalence of the United States and its parental cultures. Such were the efforts to imitate the power, taste and appearance of European empires, visitors from the old world were said to be disappointed to find only a facsimile of Europe at the fair (Orvell, 1989:59).

Rydell and Kroes have argued that World's Fairs were harbingers of the triumph of American mass culture around the world, and at the same time 'a bitterly contested terrain over the meaning and future of American society and culture' (2005:49). As a whole the Columbian Exposition might be read as the culmination of American technological modernity, the homogenising of a disparate culture and a statement of imperial intent draped in utopian mock-European finery, but the order of the White City belied the multitude of conflicting ideas and cultures contained within. The following will use three distinctive individuals and their roles within the fair as a starting point in interpreting and describing a peculiarly American cultural concept – an idea, philosophical current, epistemological thread and affective domain – which went from literary undercurrent to mass cultural obsession around the time of the Columbian Exposition. A discernible path can be traced from three prescient individuals scattered about the fair to Hollywood and the formation of its most distinctive and native genre. A legendary showman and military scout, a landscape photographer preoccupied with motion, and a young historian from Wisconsin: each unknowingly helped create the mythology and artifice, the formal apparatus, the historical and ideological complex and the affective pull which coalesced in the Hollywood western. As America turned its attention towards the East, these three individuals, like the storms which rolled into Chicago across the Great Plains, reminded patrons of the vast region which lay to the West.

William Frederick ‘Buffalo Bill’ Cody, having recently returned from touring his Wild West show around Europe, was denied a concession in the World’s Fair on the grounds of ‘incongruity.’⁶ Deemed unbecoming of inclusion in the opulent White City, despite being one of the most recognisable entertainers in the world, Cody was forced to set up his arena in a block, fittingly, just outside the western border of the fair. The location of the Wild West show inadvertently supported its themes as well as buoying its profits. Louis S. Warren suggests that the walk up the Midway past the kaleidoscopic attractions considered too exotic, commercial or carnivalesque for inclusion in the fair, towards the imperial grandeur of the White City, provides ‘lessons in the rise of mass culture and Gilded Age notions of race, conquest, and progress’ (2005:419). In this sense, one can imagine audiences experiencing the vicarious thrill of conquest and adventure in the wilderness before safely retreating into the dazzling modern spectacle of the Columbian Exposition. The conflict between settlers and natives depicted in triumphalist terms in Buffalo Bill’s show was still recent history, but with the massacre at Wounded Knee and the death of Sitting Bull and the Ghost Dance movement, white civilization was safely assured of its dominance. Audiences were invited to step across the historical rift that had opened up, befitting the late nineteenth century tendency to theatricalise experience and contain history in panoramas, rides, circuses and eventually, the cinema (Orvell, 1989:36). Wild West shows, like Indian reservations, were containments which encircled the remnants of historical actuality, confirming its demise and repurposing or falsifying its contents.

Yet, Buffalo’s Bill’s presence at the fair is not merely significant as an ideologically charged final act in the narrative of progress which defined the fair’s topography. As Michael L. Johnson argues in a study of America’s obsession with the untamed West, Cody himself embodied a new ambivalence surrounding the conquest of the West, as he became ‘haunted by the suspicion that he had killed what he most loved’ (2007:182). The spectacular success of the Wild West show – with 3.8 million tickets sold during the fair, he often upstaged the main event – cannot be interpreted as a corollary of the triumphalist and empire building designs of the neighbouring fair. On the contrary, Warren argues that the show was received by the public as ‘a natural American counterpart to all the mock Greek and Roman statues, bone-white classicism and flat-out weirdness of the White City’, being praised by one Chicago critic as a place to “find Americans, real Americans...if not in the

audience then in the performance.” (2005:420). While the show supported some aspects of U.S. ambitions for empire, Warren suggests that Buffalo Bill engaged the public on the level of the challenges of urban living and industrialisation, which shaped the daily lives of all the Chicagoans and those visitors from other big cities, providing an antidote in the shape of a vanishing world (2005:421). That the Wild West show and Cody himself would be celebrated for somehow being more ‘real’ than the rest of the fair – visitors included – is telling of the anxiety that Americans felt about their own modernization (that the new urban experience exemplified by the White City, for all its order and beauty, was somehow *unreal*) and of a peculiarly American irony described by Rebecca Solnit:

[Frontier heroes] were adored for their authenticity, for the physical courage and stamina that made their exploration of the West possible, and their encounters with the grit of real mountains and real prairies. Yet the details of their adventures and their characters were often fabricated. For the inhabitants of the Wild West they founded, there seems to have been no clear border between the world and its highly embroidered representation [...] The West to them was an arena for their self-invention, and truth was whatever the winner said it was (2003:35).

Buffalo Bill himself was a knot of self-constructed myths, but his progression from military scout to showman and entrepreneur did not prevent him from being admired for his integrity and wholeness. If the West was an unprecedented realm of mythmaking, identity swapping, boosterism, and speculation – a land of self-invention, fabrication and constant motion – it is perhaps not surprising that authenticity was so valued, as a commodity high in demand and short in supply. That Americans found the artifice of the Wild West show somehow more real than their own lives illustrates that authenticity did not depend on its present day connotations of veracity, accuracy and originality; it was a profound truth and ideal that could be forged out of any clod of Western dirt, and which spoke more about the anxieties of rapid industrialisation and urban living than it did about the accuracy of Cody’s claims.

A short walk from the Wild West arena, within the entertainments on the Midway, one could find an exhibition that has some claim on being the first motion picture theatre. Eadweard

Muybridge's Zoopraxiscope hall demonstrated a series of colour motion studies of animals, birds and humans, using a spinning glass plate painted with a series of photographic transfers, which when projected onto a screen resolved into a single moving image. Muybridge began his career as a Western landscape photographer, producing popular series on Yosemite Valley and the Pacific Railroad, demonstrating the vast grandeur of the West with daring vertiginous compositions, as well as a preoccupation with the mysterious ephemera produced by long exposures. Filmmaker Hollis Frampton observes that Muybridge's photographs of waterfalls in particular sought to master time and space by capturing the 'tesseract' of water over the duration of its exposure (1983:76). Muybridge opened up unseen and treacherous portions of the Western landscape to a Victorian public eager to contain, understand and indirectly experience the natural world at their convenience.

The motion studies displayed at the fair were the culmination of Muybridge's efforts to analyse the natural world beyond the limitations of normal perception. Yet, the exhibit in a sense contained the same modern dilemma as Buffalo Bill's Wild West show: encircling and containing (either on a rotating glass plate or a circular arena) the West or the natural world only confirms its obsolescence in reality. Landscape photography, Zoopraxiscope attractions, Wild West shows and panoramas all in different ways triggered and fed off the desire for a sense of time and place derived from nature which was increasingly an historical phenomenon. Solnit argues that this is the fundamental paradox of Muybridge's work, that 'he was using state-of-the-art equipment to feed that ravenous appetite for place, for time, for bodies' (2003:23). There is a profound irony to the fact that the authenticity, the wholeness and solidity, offered by physical contact with landscape and the sense of place it brings, can be satisfied by the very technology which annihilates the integrity of the landscape and disembodies human experience of it. Images like the motion studies of American buffalo in the Zoopraxiscope hall, were probably not appreciated by the majority as a chance to extend their knowledge of anatomy, but rather as their only opportunity to witness Cody's namesake in motion, as the buffalo was all but pushed entirely into the representational world.

The third individual whose presence at the fair can help elucidate the concept of American Authenticity could scarcely have been more anonymous during the fair itself. On the evening of July 12, Frederick Jackson Turner, a young history professor from Wisconsin addressed the annual

meeting of the American Historical Association – designed to coincide with the fair - with a paper entitled ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History.’ The tired audience, many of whom had accepted an invitation to see Buffalo Bill’s show earlier in the day, were indifferent to Turner’s ideas; there were no questions, remarkably, given the relevance of the paper to its backdrop of the Columbian Exposition.⁷ Nonetheless, the ideas first presented at the fair gained momentum, eventually influencing generations of historians, attracting the attention of U.S. presidents and extending far beyond academia, seeping into popular culture and inexorably affecting American self-understanding.⁸ The ‘frontier thesis’ became a piece of history itself, an important piece of American literature as well as an influential piece of historiography, entering national myth and raising Turner from historian to national poet, philosopher and master teacher (G. Nash, 1991:4).

Turner’s argument was, on the surface at least, in keeping with the message and tone of the Columbian Exposition as a whole. Using as his starting point an 1890 census report, which concluded that population density had reached such a point that no westward moving frontier existed, Turner went on to propose a broad evolutionary theory which attributed the distinctive character of American culture and institutions to the existence of a continually advancing line of settlement. Unlike previously accepted ‘germ theories,’ which traced American ancestry back to its Anglo-Saxon roots, Turner argued that the process of continual movement and rebirth on the frontier allowed Americans to shed their European cultural baggage, creating a uniquely American democracy and national character (Nobles, 1997:6). The argument suited the context of the World’s Fair in its suggestion that the process of American modernization was complete and that a monumental end to the era of American expansion and conflict had arrived. Turner’s suggestion that America might be read as a key page in a universal history of civilization, reading like a geological survey of economic development from West to East, carried with it at least some of the triumphalist arrogance of the Victorian era. Its assumption that industrialised and urbanised economies are the pinnacle of human development would have been appropriately illustrated by the walk up the Midway – past the Wild West show and other demeaning ethnic attractions – towards the White City, wherein, like Turner’s essay ‘the voices of race, class and gender were muted or absent’ (Ridge, 1991:10).

The content of Turner's argument might have shared an awareness of a watershed moment in U.S. history with the emphatic statement of the Columbian Exposition, but its tone and implications were considerably more downbeat. Recognising that the first formative period of American history had reached its conclusion inspired nostalgic reflection on what had been lost in the process. If the American character was formed through 'this perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society' (2008:2), as Turner claimed, what would become of it having reached the dazzling and opulent stasis of the White City? His boastful claims about the frontier origins of American intellect and thought, 'that restless energy, that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and with all that buoyancy and exuberance that comes with freedom' (2008:37), also belie an anxiety that the American mind itself might somehow stagnate without the impetus of physical movement and discovery. While Turner was busy arguing that the frontier had allowed Americans to be decontaminated and stripped of the drapery of European civilization, it cannot have escaped his attention that he was making his claims against the backdrop of Chicago, newly clad in a facsimile of the old world.

Gerald Nash suggests that Turner was an influential barometer of a generation who witnessed one world disappearing and another rapidly taking its place. The closing of the frontier was but a sign that America had rapidly transformed from a predominantly agrarian to an industrial nation, bringing with it all the problems associated with densely populated urban spaces. In the face of such radical change, Turner, along with prominent conservationists like John Muir, 'replaced the perennial optimism of nineteenth century America with a somewhat apprehensive pessimism about the future' (1991:7). But the 'frontier thesis' does not simply express nostalgia for agrarian America or a diatribe against the newly industrial nation. As Martin Ridge suggests: 'He embraced an implicit contradiction: on the one hand he took pride in American economic development, while on the other hand he felt that the American wilderness was a limitless pristine Garden of Eden' (1991:5). This central contradiction in Turner's thesis – the pull of progress accompanied by the twinge of regret, the thrill and comforts of modernity tempered by nostalgia for untainted wilderness – provided the thematic core for all manner of western fiction and film. As historiography, the 'frontier thesis' has

been thoroughly superseded – if frequently revived for appreciation or further debunking – but it is its philosophical undercurrent, its implicit antinomy and suggestion of a modern dilemma, which has made the frontier such a durable concept in popular culture. Regardless of whether such a concept accorded with lived historical actuality, the frontier provided a useable history which spoke to everyday experience as it touched on the profoundest hopes and deepest anxieties of the age.

Cody, Muybridge and Turner, for all their differences in profession and fame, were unknowingly united in 1893 in their embodiment of a radical split between the realities of the Western region of the United States, and the West of the imagination. This secession of the imaginary realm from the geographical, political and social region – with which it had once shared a symbiotic relationship – was made all the more visible by the era-defining context of the Columbian Exposition. A sense of nostalgia and loss, bound up with the many anxieties about an urban industrial age, and tempering the prevailing mood of optimism and faith in progress, developed as a by-product of this split. As Johnson argues, the relation between the wild, limitless, threatening and untameable West of the imagination, and the West as a constituent region of the nation – increasingly settled, thoroughly mapped, arranged into neat grids of state and county boundaries, bisected by railroads and streets, and covered with a mesh of barbed wire fences – was no longer reciprocal:

Americans knew the westerning American had chosen – if not uniformly then overwhelmingly – to emulate a Carnegie rather than to follow Thoreau; to dwell more on the grid fed by Henry Adams's dynamo than in the West's indigenous ecology; to accent the pride and not the shame of conquest, the pride at the trammelling of the wild that would deprive that myth of its basis in reality (2007:174).

In 1893 much of the myth surrounding the West maintained significant correspondence with reality – indeed, understanding the complex interrelation between western myth and reality remains the broad methodology behind the study of western fiction and film – but the significance lies in the realisation that the two are bound to drift irrevocably further apart.⁹ For Cody, the frontier had all but closed around his Wild West arena, which he somewhat paradoxically constructed as a bastion of real westernness to be toured around the globe. Muybridge, whose pioneering photography helped shrink and contain the very region it celebrated, laid the foundations for the West to become a predominantly

fictitious and representational space, as ‘what was vanishing in ecology reappeared in imagery’ (Solnit, 2003:65). Whereas Cody no doubt felt the implications of the split, and Muybridge’s work represented it, Turner’s ‘frontier thesis’ stands as its most influential interpreter and transmitter. That the existence of free land acts as a safety valve, allowing for encounters with wilderness to refresh the intellect, strip away the drapery of civilization, spur democracy and create a sense of wholeness and being remains a potent concept in American culture. The philosophical implications of Turner’s essay – the idea that a distinctly American ideal of authenticity lies on the frontier, temporally and spatially disconnected from the present – withstand any discrediting of its historical accuracy.¹⁰

With the success of ‘Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,’ the Columbian Exposition confirmed the potency and appeal of Authenticity in emergent mass culture. It is no surprise therefore that the West immediately became the subject for some of the earliest American films. The new medium offered the potential to represent the West in all its vastness and variety, like a modern artistic corollary to the annihilation of time and space and the continual framing and reframing of the landscape seen from a train window. Yet for all the potential film carried to bring the ideas and concepts already attached to the West into vivid realisation, adapting what had existed in theatre, literature or intellectual discourse into an essentially photographic medium with as yet undefined properties, posed certain problems. Besides the many technical limitations and the fact the US film industry was then centred on New York, filmmakers had to work out how to represent the many vague, slippery and romantic ideas about the West with this most modern of attractions. Richard Slotkin argues that this ‘authenticity dilemma’ was catalytic in the development of the western as a film genre:

The early development of the genre was shaped by the problems and opportunities arising from the filmmaker’s need to adapt existing images and ideas associated with the West to the new medium. The most characteristic of these problems is the dilemma of authenticity. Cultural tradition defined ‘the West’ as both an actual place with a real history and as a mythic space populated by projective fantasies. Expectations about western stories were therefore contradictory: they had to seem in some way realistic or “authentic” while at the same time conforming to ideas [...] derived from literary fantasy (1992:234).

Slotkin uses authenticity in the sense of what was deemed accurate or realistic by contemporary standards (what was considered ‘the real thing’ at the turn of the century), with the mythic being the various ideas, fantasies, stories and archetypes that have accumulated on top of this historical fact. What I am terming American Authenticity is connected to this more common usage of the term, but also to some specific cultural traditions associated with western myth. As a concept it is a part of the myth of the West, but uniquely one which demands concrete proof; an epistemological tendency which invents an ontological basis for its claims. The authenticity dilemma for early filmmakers was a balancing act between satisfying the public’s demands for the mythic West – entertaining, vigorous, seemingly more ‘real’ than contemporary life – and, even more urgently considering the pace of change, that it be represented exactly as it was.

The public demonstration of the Edison Company’s Kinetoscope, inspired by Muybridge’s Zoopraxiscope and generally considered to have inaugurated the age of American cinema, was originally planned to be a part of the Columbian Exposition, but actually took place in Brooklyn in May 1893 as the fair was already underway.¹¹ The first appearance of Native Americans on film, little over a year later in a film labelled ‘Sioux Ghost Dance’ shot in Edison’s Black Maria studio, illustrates how quickly filmmakers realised the potential for making the West into a film attraction, and anticipates how filmmakers would approach the authenticity dilemma on film in the silent era. Prominently displayed in the bottom right hand corner of the shot, is a sign with ‘Buffalo Bill’s Wild West’ written on it. The group of Sioux perform the dance intended to reunite the living with the spirits of the dead against the dark walls of the Black Maria, while Buffalo Bill implicitly delivers his usual promise of reincarnating the past through the presence of ‘real’ stars of the Old West. Early filmmakers would follow the Buffalo Bill model of authenticity, which did not merely claim to be an authentic *representation* – indeed Cody asserted that the spectacle inside his arena was not a show at all – but rather ‘the real thing’ itself, authenticated by the presence of those with some (probably dubious) history in the Old West. As the film industry migrated West these opportunistic celebrity lawmen, gunfighters and outlaws were joined by ‘unemployed cowboys and hungry reservation Indians [who] looked to regional and Hollywood movie companies for work, as once they had looked to the Wild West’ (Slotkin, 1992:235). Scott Simmon suggests this reliance on the formulas of Wild

West shows is what first led audiences and critics to seek authenticity in early westerns; films such as Thomas H. Ince's *The Invaders* (1912), featured 'The Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Real Wild West Show' and an array of Oglala Sioux performers as an appeal to authenticity (2003:61).

The Wild West show and the early western film both relied upon the sense of authenticity brought by their stars and performers who functioned as living indexes to a still recent but rapidly disappearing world. It is difficult today to see past the flagrant ideology and circuslike theatricality of surviving documents of the Wild West shows, yet their appeal lay precisely in their being real experiences. Simmon suggests Mark Twain's reaction to 'Buffalo Bill's Wild West' as something "genuine...wholly free from sham and insincerity" demonstrates how the West gradually became the privileged site of a nostalgia tinged authenticity, shaped in opposition to contemporary life: 'What must then be implied behind such paeans as Mark Twain's to the genuine reality of such blatantly theatrical pageants as the Wild West show is that the West itself is authentic, versus existentially inauthentic life lived elsewhere' (2003:66). What we might say is that early westerns using the Wild West show formula were still a part of the encircling frontier in which a degree of overlap between historical actuality and fictional representation was still a possibility; residues of the Old West charged westerns with authenticity; indexes and details were capable of reconstructing the larger Authenticity of the West itself with a complicit audience. However, as Slotkin writes, the western's capacity to contain the West itself was bound to diminish over time:

What became essential to the creation of an illusion of authenticity and historicity was not the presence of "real old-time outlaw" or "Last Stand Survivor," but the establishment of a set of habitual associations between image and idea that would ultimately constitute a code or language of cinematic symbols, understood by both filmmaker and audience as referring to or symbolizing "the historical West" or "the real thing" (1992:237).

Exactly what the authentic might mean is constantly shifting and so too are the methods used by filmmakers to represent it, but that the West is the privileged site of American Authenticity only gains capital as variations of the concept are reproduced and the historical actuality of the West becomes indelibly obscured by its representations.

The Columbian Exposition represents but one of a series of pivotal moments in American culture in which a lost sense of authenticity attached to the American West is simultaneously reinvented and mourned in response to the supposed inauthenticity of American experience. As an effect of contemporary malaises, the nature of American Authenticity constantly shifts, yet its locus remains at a point of supposed balance represented by the frontier in the nineteenth century. The remainder of this chapter will review the place of the concept in the epistemology of the genre, suggesting reasons for its absence or supporting role and arguing for a concerted examination of the pursuit of authenticity in the western; a comparison of two major John Ford films and their place in critical literature provides a demonstration of the value of the concept; and the final section explores the origins of American Authenticity, locating its wellspring in the transcendentalism of Thoreau and Emerson, and emphasising its distinctive relation to American modernization.

Typologies of Western Genre Criticism

Two of the earliest and most influential essays on the genre, Andre Bazin's 'The Western: Or the American Film Par Excellence' (1953) and Robert Warshow's 'The Westerner' (1954) demonstrate an awareness of the importance of authenticity to the western despite their divergent cultural and theoretical backgrounds. Together these essays paint a picture of a uniquely indigenous genre combining historicity with the universality of myth, and generating serious examinations of philosophies of the individual, of morality and of violence. However, the speculative and ruminative qualities of these short essays have gone largely undeveloped. In a brief bibliographical survey, I will demonstrate how important claims made by Bazin and Warshow relevant to American Authenticity have been ignored by the avenues of genre criticism which grew out these early essays.

Warshow recognised the distinctive appeal of the western hero by comparing him to another archetypal figure of American cinema, the gangster, famously beginning his essay with the observation that the two most successful creations of Hollywood are 'men with guns' (2004:703). What distinguishes these violent outsiders, other than their milieu – the gangster being an urban

twentieth century figure, the westerner predominantly nineteenth century and habitually rural – Warshow suggests, is precisely the authentic appeal of the westerner: ‘The gangster’s loneliness and melancholy are not ‘authentic’; like everything else that belongs to him, they are not honestly come by’ (2004:704). The westerner, by contrast and owing to his clear if imperfect moral code, is ‘a figure of repose,’ his melancholy not derived from a perilous situation, but from the sheer struggle of existence: ‘his melancholy comes from the simple recognition that life is unavoidably serious, not from the dispositions of his own temperament. And his loneliness is organic, not imposed upon him by his situation but belonging to him intimately and testifying to his completeness’ (2004:704). The appeal of the western lies not simply in the integrity and representativeness of the westerner, or his embodiment of modern dilemmas through loneliness and melancholy, but also according to Warshow ‘because it offers a serious orientation to the problem of violence such as can be found almost nowhere in our culture’ (2004:715). Warshow suggested that the westerner’s stylised and carefully justified code of violence is but another aspect of his self-reliance. Gilberto Perez suggests that Warshow’s essay is paid little attention in recent studies of the western precisely because it demands that we take violence seriously, that we consider violence as an image of politics, and not simply condemn it out of righteousness (1998:235-6). Put differently, the implications of Warshow’s summary of the genre demands that we not separate the attractive, even utopian, aspects of American Authenticity from its more controversial or unsettling ramifications.¹²

If Warshow outlined the features of the westerner’s authenticity, Bazin’s essay, despite making no direct reference to the concept, articulated the generic specificity that made the western the privileged vehicle for the concept. As I will attempt to demonstrate, American Authenticity has frequently slipped through the cracks of western genre criticism as a result of a tendency which has polarized what Bazin took to be axiomatic: that the western is a genre in which uniquely (at least in an American context) the historical and the mythic share a symbiotic relationship. Bazin readily admitted that ‘few westerns are explicitly concerned with historical accuracy’ and stressed the worldwide appeal and universality of a form which expressed itself as an epic (‘the migration to the West is our Odyssey’). However, he did not see the genre’s epic qualities, historical inaccuracies, outlandish exaggeration or use of *deus ex machina* as any way at odds with its essential historicity (and therefore

with its social or political functions); rather that historicity in tandem with culture's distortions constitutes 'the foundation of its aesthetic and its psychology' (2005:148). Authenticity emerges as a concept so forcefully in the western film because of this process of constant distorting, reinventing and mythologizing a recent past, geographically specific, and almost in touching distance.

Genre critics have tended to repress either side of this history/generic myth dialectic, 'scolding films for their evident failure to reproduce history with any accuracy or denying any relation between westerns and the real West' (Simmon, 2003: xiii). Janet Walker, in a recent introduction to a volume of essays on westerns as historiography writes that 'a close examination of the major writings on the western genre reveals a marked disinclination to the historical' with even avowedly historical approaches tending to perceive a film's contemporary context of production as more significant than its historiographic impetus (2001:5). However, Walker does not propose that we view all westerns as works of history per se, suggesting instead '[a] melange of history, fiction and historiographic metafiction that characterises the western genre while figuring in individual films and film groupings in seemingly endless combination' (2001:15). American Authenticity, I will argue, is a crucial conceptual thread within the western with the potential to resolve the history/myth divide in genre criticism without imposing a rule on the endless combinations of historicity possible within the form. I will demonstrate that unpicking a film's concern with the authentic necessarily entails understanding its attitude toward history alongside its contemporary cultural and social contexts and relations to other texts. American Authenticity assumes a redoubled historicity or impossible tense at play in the western, asking what is at stake in constructing an always-already lost past which is in turn projected back upon the present.

The original sin of western genre criticism, at least as far as hindering the development of cultural histories that would allow concepts like authenticity to take centre stage, has been the assumption that the origins of the genre are coincident with the invention of cinema itself. Even Bazin, who appreciated the historicity of the form, began his first essay on the genre with the assumption that 'the western is the only genre whose origins are identical with those of cinema itself' (2005:140). While it is commonplace to recognise the lineage of the western novel – usually James Fennimore Cooper's Leatherstocking series – genre criticism tends to agree that the western is a

twentieth century mass cultural cinematic phenomenon (Schatz, 1988).¹³ Where genre criticism does extend back to the silent period it is usually to acknowledge the commercial success and narrative innovation of *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903). However its reputation as the western's 'ur-text' has been challenged, not least by the existence of various Edison company films documenting Western life and the Buffalo Bill show dating from almost a decade earlier (Buscombe, 1988:22), and the fact that Porter's film was likely received by audiences as a contemporary crime drama (Lenihan in Acquila, 1996:110). The greater objection to the tendency to view the western as coterminous and entwined with Hollywood cinema is the resultant propensity to isolate the Hollywood western from a much longer cultural history about the West. This chapter began using the 1893 Chicago World's Fair to demonstrate how sophisticated cultural ideas about the American West had already developed and were poised to proliferate in emergent forms of mass culture. I will go on to demonstrate how the same conceptual thread of American Authenticity which animates Hollywood westerns can be traced back much further into the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries, but suffice to point out for now that any understanding of the western based on the assumption that it was invented by Hollywood will be impoverished by severing these deep cultural roots. As Tag Gallagher points out, the relation between Hollywood and the western might even be inverted: '[...] it may well be that, rather than the cinema having invented the western, it was the western, already long existent in popular culture, that invented the cinema.' (2003:264).

The growth of film studies as a discrete discipline in the 1960s fostered a tendency for the western to be divorced from wider culture and history in genre studies. Following the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the western's easily identifiable codes and conventions made it a useful case study in the task of uncovering the hidden structures of popular mythologies, and understanding genres as signifying systems. Whether avowedly structuralist or not, Kitses (1969), Wollen (1972), Cawelti (1971) and Wright (1977) all attempted broadly 'structural' or linguistic analyses of the genre, focussing on schematic oppositions and signs and revealing aspects of the western which made it a paradigmatic case of popular culture as mythology. Edward Buscombe's 1970 essay, 'The Idea of Genre in American Cinema' used the western to put forward the idea that genres are composed of (predominantly visual) outer forms which predispose but do not dictate its

inner forms (its themes and world-view). This understanding of genre opens up the possibility that the western may be outwardly historical but its inner meanings may have little to do with historical interpretation (2003:25).

While attempts to evolve a unified theory of genre may have been revealing about the universality of mythologies and the repetition of similar structural oppositions across genres, the structuralist tendency was necessarily a reductive one. The historicity of the western, its place within wider cultural traditions, and its relation to contemporary social contexts tend to be denied in favour of the universality of plots and archetypes. As Cawelti writes, with a small degree of contrition, in a revised edition of *The Six Gun Mystique*: 'This [structuralist] orientation led to the development of a variety of new and more complex techniques for analysing the distinctive structures, symbolism and narrative methods of popular works and a de-emphasis on the relationship between these works and the societies and cultures which produced them' (1999:4). Such a de-emphasis is not conducive to the kind of conceptual cultural-historical approach being espoused here. As a close consideration of the ways in which culture invests in and interrogates the past in response to specific contemporary contexts and within longstanding cultural traditions, American Authenticity demands the kind of analysis that structuralism refused.

A corollary of structural theory's attempts to contain and explain the entirety of a genre has been the various attempts to develop a theory of generic evolution to account for generic changes (narrative structures, themes, visual styles) so evident in the post-war era and throughout the sixties. Bazin again was the first to attempt such an evolutionary narrative in relation to the western, as he distinguished between the classical perfection of the pre-war western and the increasingly self-aware, visually baroque and psychologically complex post-war 'superwesterns' (2005:149). However, that Bazin would pick *Shane* (1953) and *High Noon* (1952) as epitomising a latter stage in the evolution of the genre, two films commonly considered as definitively classical examples, immediately suggests problems with evolutionary narratives: Firstly, they require a stable definition of a state of generic purity or classicism, which simply does not exist. Secondly, they tend to overemphasise the innovations of the new while oversimplifying the old. Close examination of supposedly classical texts tends to reveal all manner of self-consciousness, intertextuality and generic revisionism (Simmon,

2003; Gallagher, 2003). A model for generic evolution would be developed in greater theoretical detail by Christian Metz, who suggests genres (again, using the western as a paradigmatic case study) move through categories of classicism, parody, contestation and finally deconstruction (1975:148-61). Thomas Schatz similarly suggests that genres move through stages from the experimental to the classical, through refinement, and on to a mannerist self-reflexivity (1981:37).¹⁴

While such narratives of generic evolution might effectively describe some of the major changes within the western up to a certain point, they are usually based upon a relatively small sample of canonical films and risk viewing generic development as a wholly internal process, explicable without recourse to changing social and industrial contexts. Theory once conceived of genres as monolithic objects or 'infinite texts' (Metz, 1975:152); a genre's codes might overlap with those of another, but film genres were definable teleological objects operating along a continuum according to an internal logic which dictated something like a lifespan. The persistence of the western in various forms after its supposed exhaustion in the late seventies alone suggests the flaws in the evolutionary model. As Barry Langford writes, 'the evolutionary model of genre history is disproved by nothing so much as allegedly moribund genres' refusal to give up the ghost' (2005:74). Theory now considers genres as 'ubiquitous multifaceted phenomena rather than as one dimensional entities only to be found within the realms of Hollywood or commercial popular culture' (Neale, 2000:28). Clusters of related cultural references and codes, their edges blurred by generic hybridity, have replaced the notion of singular monolithic genres, while issues of generic self-consciousness and identification (revisionism, parody, pastiche) complicate any straightforward generic classification further. The cultural historical approach adopted here demands for a dynamic conception of genre as consisting of both continuities (in terms of an intellectual and cultural tradition and sets of meanings, themes, and aesthetics) and constant adaptations (personal interventions, responses to changing contexts, revisionism, and so forth).

The main objection to both structural analyses of the western and resultant evolutionary generic narratives for the present work is that these kinds of genre criticism are in themselves inauthentic. In attempting to understand the entirety of a genre (albeit usually through a canonical and unrepresentative sample), and by reducing films to abstracted signs, codes, icons, schematic

oppositions and archetypes, genre criticism has too often detached itself from the individual text and therefore from the audience. To reverse the idiom, structuralist genre criticism has struggled to see the trees from the wood. Tag Gallagher has taken issue with a number of broadly speaking structural critics for neglecting film aesthetics, suggesting that because of genre theory's origins in literary criticism, there has been a tendency to equate 'the experience of a movie with analytic perception of its narrative.' Genre criticism, Gallagher bemoans, 'seems almost endemically anti-phenomenological' (2003:273). This privileging of narrative and relative marginalization of aesthetics has a significant bearing on the absence of authenticity from genre criticism.¹⁵

It is perhaps the affectively ambiguous quality of the western, particularly in its post-war forms, that accounts for the privileging of narrative over aesthetics. The western is not easily classified by the kinds of emotional or sensational responses it elicits from its audience. The kind of responses which define the three 'body genres' (pornography, melodrama and horror), in Linda Williams's influential conception (1991:2-4), or other film genres 'which portray and affect the sensational body' (thrillers, musicals and comedies), are clearly not essential to any definition of the western (there are of course melodramatic, horrific, even pornographic westerns, as there are musical and comedy westerns, but these are marginal generic hybrids or affective overtones within the genre, rather than essential features). This central affective ambiguity has meant that the western has readily been defined, and therefore analysed, in concrete narratological terms. The concept of American Authenticity being expounded here has potential to restore a consideration of phenomenology to the analysis of the western, accounting for the affective ambiguity of the genre and establishing links between the genre's aesthetics and its redoubled historicity. American Authenticity may be a strain of political philosophy, but it also has affective dimensions: its characteristic affective tenor of melancholy or nostalgia, originating in the western's distinct temporality is closer to a low-lying mood than the strong emotions sought by most genre cinema, but is nonetheless essential for meaningful interpretation of an individual film. It is worthwhile here to draw on the distinction made by Noël Carroll between objective or intentional cognitive emotions on the one hand, and objectless and pervasive moods which act as a cognitive bias colouring perception on the other (2003: 525-30). The kinds of affect associated with American Authenticity would seem to belong to the category of

mood – nostalgia and melancholy tend to be objectless and pervasive, arising from a vague sense of longing or loss – rather than emotion, even if they are engendered by and give rise to stronger intentional emotions. Moreover, moods are quite different to the strong emotions and reflexes of the ‘body genres’ in that they cannot be straightforwardly expressed or given; moods have to be engendered with the participation of the spectator, drawing upon supposed predispositions, and are therefore social as well as aesthetic matters.

In summation, the critics I have bundled together as being broadly ‘structural’ – that is, whether avowedly structuralist or not, concerned with the western as a key to understanding genre as a linguistic or symbolic system – have established several critical orthodoxies which have prevented a concept like authenticity from being isolated and foregrounded in studies of the western. Firstly, the tendency to view the western as a mid-twentieth century cinematic phenomenon has precluded understanding of the genre in relation to wider cultural and intellectual traditions. Secondly, reducing the genre’s setting to a system of signs that constitute a popular mythology has led to a refusal of the western’s distinct historicity and temporality. Thirdly, western genre criticism has tended to focus more on variations in narrative and plot than film aesthetics. And lastly, efforts to define the genre as a single entity have led to specious evolutionary or teleological narratives.

Despite their negligence of film aesthetics, the structural critics are predominantly interested in the textual features of the western, even if that text is the ‘infinite text’ of the genre and popular myth as a whole. Wider cultural and social contexts are either absent or subservient (as in Cawelti and Wright) to the inner workings of the genre. In what has proved to be the most enduring mode of genre criticism, a group methodologically related to the structural critics has attempted to understand the western’s structural oppositions as being informed by cultural contradictions. These critics are predominantly interested in the subtext of westerns in order to understand the relation of the genre to contemporary social, cultural and political contexts. Works by French (1973), Tuska (1985), Lenihan (1985), Slotkin (1992) and Coyne (1998) and Corkin (2004) emphasise the importance of the western as national mythology, arguing that the western perhaps more than any other genre is, as Stanley Corkin puts it ‘sensitive to the currents of historical change but also expressive of shifts in national mood and circumstance’ (2004:2), particularly at times of crisis or conflict. Genre in these works

predominantly functions as allegory or parable; as a means to encode ideology in popular, comprehensible and immediately recognisable forms.

Philip French, writing outside of academia, was among the first to stress the ahistorical and allegorical nature of the genre, venturing that ‘events depicted have little to do with real nineteenth century life’ and proposing readings of films as reflections of different aspects of contemporary political life, represented by the rhetoric and public personae of prominent politicians (1973:12).

Whereas French suggested that the western be read as contested ideological terrain, accommodating a variety of different values, the tendency for allegorical and ideological criticism has been to read the western in hegemonic terms; as offering affirmation of national values and institutions and resolving cultural contradictions. Jon Tuska, for instance, focuses on the historical inaccuracies as evidence of an insidious and coercive whitewashing of history at the genre’s core, stating he is principally concerned with ‘the social and psychological aspects of the systematic distortion and misrepresentation of the past [...] on the many potential dangers that arise from what can only be termed a habituation to falsehood’ (1985:xiv). Ward Churchill similarly focuses on the historical falsehood of the genre, suggesting the western predominantly functions to legitimize a white supremacist interpretation of history (1992).

Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation*, the third part of a trilogy on the myth of the frontier, remains the definitive work in the ideological and allegorical mode. Slotkin intricately analyses an extensive array of westerns in relation to specific social contexts, but the foundation of his work is that the western is ‘a field for making public myths and for the symbolization of ideology’ (1992:279). Above all Slotkin sees the frontier myth as a means of working through issues of American national identity and foreign policy, often by justifying the necessity of regenerative violence in the defence of core American values. The pre-eminence of the western as a popular genre is closely correlated in Slotkin’s argument to the emergence of the US as global military superpower in the post-war era. The western consists of a public mythology running parallel to contemporary social and political life:

The beginning of the Cold War in 1948 inaugurated the golden age of the western: a twenty five year period, regularly punctuated by the appearance of remarkable films, that saw the

genre achieve its greatest popularity and that ended with its virtual disappearance from the genre map. The rise of and fall of the western mirrors the development of the Cold War and its sustaining ideological consensus in 1948-54 to its fulfilment in the years of the liberal counteroffensive under Kennedy and Johnson, to its disruption by the failure of war in Vietnam [...] the genre provided a frame in which alternative approaches to political and ideological problems of the Cold War era could be imaginatively entertained (1992:347).

Indeed, allegorical and ideological perspectives on the western tend to focus on this 'golden age' in which the western's broad popularity and mass production seem to justify seeing the genre as a kind of mirror for American society. Yet, this perspective also runs the risk of imposing a different kind of evolutionary narrative on the genre; where the structural critics read an inner generic development from classicism to self-consciousness and deconstruction, ideological and allegorical critics chart a generic lifespan according to an outer resonance with developments in US social and political life, from Cold War consensus to Vietnam disillusionment. The usefulness and potency of the frontier myth to transcode issues surrounding US foreign policy might help explain the genre's popularity and heightened profile in the post-war era – as well as offering insightful readings of more overtly allegorical films – but clearly this does not constitute an essential feature of the genre, merely one of many potential uses.

Though there is undoubtedly a tendency to view the western as the most ideologically complicit of Hollywood genres (with film noir the *enfant terrible*), critics who view the West as a predominantly mythic and allegorical space have also revealed the genre as a field for subversiveness and social critique. As Douglas Kellner writes, the Hollywood system has traditionally 'prized difference and variation within accepted boundaries and left a limited range open for artistic expression and social commentary [...] genre films could thus be used to contest ideological norms as well as reproduce them, and to provide ideology critique as well as legitimization' (1998:359). Thus in the HUAC (The House Un-American Activities Committee) and Production Code era the western has been read as offering a patriotic disguise and plausible deniability for various un-American activities: explorations of racial injustice, criticism of attacks on civil liberties caused by McCarthyism, anxieties about conformity and dark representations of the nuclear family, and critiques

of patriarchal capitalism, are among the pressing contemporary themes found in many post-war westerns.¹⁶ It is commonplace also to acknowledge the brazenly allegorical nature of some revisionist ‘Vietnam westerns’¹⁷ of the early seventies, as the genre became a vehicle for anti-establishment feeling and critiques of American imperialism.

The main objection to viewing westerns predominantly as myth and allegory is that the relation between films and contemporary contexts is construed as directly causal, with genre constituting a kind of cultural automatic writing which generally transcribes mainstream ideology but occasionally stumbles across latent sociological issues. The challenge is not to separate the western’s historical referent from its contemporary social, political, and cultural contexts, but rather to consider how films interpret and construct images of the past in relation to the present historical moment, and therefore their role in shaping values and political discourse. The conceptual approach of American Authenticity will do justice to the redoubled historicity of the western, exploring the dynamic relationship between history, universal myth and contemporary contexts at play in the genre.

The ideological and allegorical critics above principally analyse the relation between generic structures and broad issues in American social and political life; the main concern being whether the genre reconciles cultural contradictions and affirms dominant ideology, or offers ideological critique by exposing contradictions, anxieties or latent issues. Less dependent on allegorical interpretation but no less anti-historicist are those critics principally focussed on masculinity, its role and representation within the western, and its relation to gender politics. As the western, like the war film or the gangster genre, addresses itself primarily to a male audience and overwhelmingly focuses on male protagonists – concerned aphoristically with what “a man’s gotta do” – images and questions of masculinity have been interpreted as central to the form. Like the wider issue of ideology and the western, the masculinity issue has been interpreted both in terms of complicity and critique.

For Jane Tompkins, the historicity and the geography of the genre are limited to providing a stock of rugged, monosyllabic heroes whose stoical silence ‘symbolises a massive suppression of the inner life’ (1992:66). According to Tompkins the western has its origins in a reaction against the feminisation of culture in the nineteenth century novel and continually addresses crises of masculinity by offering ideal images of patriarchy, emotional repression and physical superiority: ‘the western

doesn't have anything to do with the West as such. It isn't about the encounter between civilization and the frontier. It's about men's fear of losing their mastery, hence their identity, both of which the western tirelessly reinvents' (1992:45). Though more cautious, admitting that the success of the western is overdetermined, its appeal derived from its ability to sustain multiple interpretations, Lee Clark Mitchell broadly agrees: westerns continually 'make the man' and 'crises about gender construction' help explain its broad based appeal (1996:122).¹⁸

The distillation of master-themes such as masculinity might explain the appeal and provide insightful readings of certain westerns, but it is inevitably a reductive critical tendency if made to apply to the entirety of the genre (as established in the previous section, notions of genres as single entities are in themselves suspect). The masculinity thesis touches upon authenticity but its scope is narrower. Developing an understanding of the anxieties and projective fantasies spectators bring to films, and analysing the kinds of identity and psychology constructed in the genre are concerns from which a concept like authenticity might arise. Indeed, Tompkins begins her study of the 'inner life of the western' with a description of the authentic appeal of genre, stating that 'westerns satisfy a hunger to be in touch with something absolutely real', before this something is subsequently reduced to a reactionary image of masculinity:

The West functions as a symbol of freedom, and of the opportunity for conquest. It seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society: from mechanized existence, economic dead ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relationships, political injustice. The desire to change places also signals a powerful need for self-transformation. The desert light and desert space, the creak of saddle leather and the sun beating down, the horses' energy and force – these things promise a translation of the self into something purer and more authentic, more intense, more real (1992:3-4).

This opening paean to authenticity and the western – to the possibility for self-renewal, escape from modern adversities, freedom and sensorial pleasures, assumed to be the source of the genre's appeal – is typical of the way the language of authenticity appears in genre criticism only to be rejected in favour of more reductive or tangible themes; effective in description but rarely coalescing into coherent conceptual subject matter. Authenticity tends to be a middle class and white male

preoccupation – indeed, the ideal of authenticity pursued in westerns may in some cases be synonymous with anxieties about a supposed lapsed state of rugged masculinity – but the pursuit of authenticity itself pretends to transcend barriers of gender, class, and race with the imagination of universal ideals of self, nature, and nation.

The critics I have identified as being predominantly concerned with allegory and masculinity have inclined towards viewing the genre as a richly symbolic form of popular mythology through which contemporary issues are encoded. This insistence on the mythic has led to a downplaying of the genre's historicity and to the formation of totalising and sometimes reductive master-themes. The problem has long been how to interpret and say anything meaningful about such a large body of films – which appear on the surface such a cohesive phenomenon, an unmistakable genre – without sacrificing the sheer variety and complexity of meanings these ostensibly similar films produce. Viewing the genre through the conceptual framework of authenticity does not preclude allegorical interpretation, ideological analysis or discussion of identity politics. On the contrary, exploring the vectors of authenticity – that is, inquiring as to the changing expressions and directions of a broad concept in American culture, with the western as its privileged vehicle – will enable the genre's relation to contemporary contexts (its ideology and politics) to be understood in all their peculiarity and complexity.

The Western as American Modernism

Works which consciously restrict themselves to a smaller selection of films – focussing on canonical texts (Perez, 1998; Pippin, 2010), the work of a particular filmmaker in the genre (Gallagher, 1986), a particular historical era (Stanfield, 2001; Simmon, 2003) or subgenre – have traditionally been areas in which due attention is given to the individual text, specific social contexts and audience reception, thus respecting the thematic complexity of the form and avoiding totalising or evolutionary generic narratives. Different periods in the history of the genre, the works of individual filmmakers, and different types of western – in terms of sub-genre or plot paradigms¹⁹ – will doubtless offer varying degrees of resonance with the concept; notions of authenticity, I argue, animate and form the

conceptual heart of the genre, but it is in the work of John Ford that the concept comes vividly into focus, and has been the subject of scholarly debate. The following will demonstrate the ways in which authenticity has been foregrounded in works which explore the western as a distinctively ambivalent form of American modernism, before focusing on the role of the concept in the analysis of two major westerns by John Ford: *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962).

In the introduction to his influential set of analyses of major directors of westerns, Jim Kitses realised that ambivalence, vacillation and conflict within the restrictive western formula constituted the genre's thematic material itself, intimately connected to the historical subject of matter of the movement, transition and conflict of the modernising frontier in the mid to late nineteenth century: 'central to the form, we have a philosophical dialectic, an ambiguous cluster of meanings and attitudes that provide the traditional thematic structure of the genre' (1969:12). That Kitses expressed these 'shifting antinomies' in the form of a grid of oppositions, grouped under the Turnerian umbrella opposition of wilderness and civilization, has led the 'shifting antinomies' to be misinterpreted as an absolute structuralist binary.²⁰ Rather, the grid is intended as a critical tool, a key to the ambivalences, irresolvable conflicts, the push and pull of values and ideas, and the sheer range of expression possible within the western. Crucially, these antinomies are universal and historical; able to adapt to any given context, yet achieving special resonance during the modernising frontier of the mid-nineteenth century. As a concept American Authenticity is like Kitses' grid of 'shifting antinomies' reconfigured through the prism of individual subjectivity, an ideal vacillating between wilderness and civilization and residing in the midst of modernisation, wherein such ambivalence represented divergent paths as yet untaken.

As a starting point, American Authenticity might be understood as a backward looking form of modernism – not the futuristic modernism of formal abstraction, fragmentation, or self-reflexivity, as we might commonly conceive it with avant-garde movements of the early-twentieth century – but in a rather more basic way, as a reflection on the process of modernisation, so visible in the western expansion of the United States. Westerns reimagine this process of modernization, dramatizing its effects – either in celebration or regret, but more often ambivalently – from the perspective of a present that has lost sight of the pre-modern and still faces an uncertain future. The West represents

the United States ‘year zero,’ a fertile site for exploring modern dilemmas past and present in that it bridges the divide between the modern world and the pre-modern wilderness. Simmon has argued that the western is ‘for all its formal and narratological classicism – a peculiarly American form of modernism’, owing to its characteristic preoccupation with the collisions between old and new and the relations between time and space (2003:10). In his work on 1930s westerns, Stanfield too sees the cowboy as ‘a figure produced by the social tensions engendered by industrialisation’ and the West as a ‘site of displacement for concerns around modernisation’ (2001:12).

Importantly, westerns have the potential to do more than simply re-enact the processes of modernization or celebrate or condemn such a process in a rational, scientific manner. As aesthetic artefacts, westerns have the potential to explore modern dilemmas in terms of individual experience and feeling. Robert B. Pippin argues that great westerns (his approach is unashamedly canonical) address the fundamental problems of political philosophy arising from rapid modernisation, and are vital because they explore the psychological and first-person experiential dimensions of political life (2010:16). That westerns raise questions about the best way to live within complex mythic-historical melodramatic narratives, affirming some ways of life and rejecting others makes them, according to Pippin, psychologically rich works of political philosophy in themselves; westerns are capable of expressing doubts about the psychological impact of modernity as much as European philosophers from Rousseau to Weber or Heidegger: ‘that modern political life [...] is psychologically unsatisfying or even psychologically unworthy of human beings’ (2010:69). No wonder that authenticity – an ideal forged in recognition of the problem of reconciling the integrated self with a modern world which alienates, fragments and erodes that sense of self – becomes such a prominent, bordering on tragic theme in westerns which explore the psychology of political life at the tipping point of American modernization. The frontier is where culture imagines Authenticity existed as a possibility before it was succeeded by modern political life. American Authenticity is a concept which nuances the absolute ‘rugged individualism’ often assumed to be one of the genre’s core values, explaining its connection to modernization and its dilemmas, and returning the antimony to a concept which has long been oversimplified and drained of its potential to explore the philosophical, political and aesthetic dimensions of westerns.

John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), amidst the A-western revival of the thirties, offers a case study of a film which has received so much critical attention precisely because it contains the beginnings of a conceptual or philosophical richness not visible elsewhere in westerns of the era. It has been objected that Ford, with his scholarly and considered attitude to history, has too often been considered as a paradigmatic director of westerns, resulting in a distorted impression about the genre's essential historicity (Buscombe, 2003:19). Indeed, it is the exceptional, rather than the constitutive nature of Ford's historicity which makes his work, and scholarly writing on his work, useful for illustrating American Authenticity.

That the Hollywood western is American history incarnate is the explicit claim of the thirties A-western. As Scott Simmon observes, 'it's the rare A-western that fails to make claims about its historical accuracy, usually in an opening crawl of written text, itself implying greater authenticity [of the lesser variety] than mere ephemeral speech' (2003:108). These typically lavish productions, sometimes known as the 'nation-founding' or 'progressive' epics – including *Union Pacific* (1939), *Dodge City* (1939), *Western Union* (1941) and *American Empire* (1942), to name a few prominent and indicatively titled examples – have been read by critics, most notably by Slotkin, as being 'relentlessly progressive' in their attitude to history, celebrating 'all persons, tendencies and crises that yield higher rates of production, faster transportation, more advanced technology and more civilized forms of society' (1992:286). The epic A-western typically celebrates the Old West as the process or series of trails through which the nation achieved its present greatness. Unlike its 'ideological antithesis,' 'Cult of the Outlaw' westerns like *Jesse James* (1939) which adopted the perspective of those victimised by technological and industrial progress (Slotkin, 1992:286), the nation itself – rather than the authentic American individual – is the protagonist of the A-western revival.

However, despite its habit of adopting the tone of a celebratory history textbook, the thirties western has been interpreted as being predominantly addressed at the present state of the nation, operating through thinly disguised allegory, as Hollywood sought to navigate a contentious political climate of post-Depression 'Americanism' and isolationism. Peter Stanfield argues that during the late thirties and early forties in particular 'westerns were recognised by both the industry and its critics as

having an ideological accent that enabled Hollywood to practice a limited and cautious form of propaganda for the defence of American values' (2001:193). Seeking to appease exhibitors and satisfy a divided public across both rural and metropolitan areas and carefully balancing noncommittal support for contentious domestic issues – while plausibly denying any stake in 'America First' isolationism or interventionist platforms (Stanfield, 2001:152, 193) – the historical claims of the western were an effective form of allegorical window-dressing for a contemporary national drama. Somewhat ironically, as Scott Simmon points out, the western made its historical claims at least partially to distract from a very pressing turning point in American history: 'the ambitious A-western sets up a dialogue about the nature of American history and the relationship of that history to contemporary life that it proved so completely ill equipped to resolve [...] lecturing us with a history lesson that they never follow through to its implications' (2003:103).

Foremost amongst these ignored implications is the reality of the much vaunted notion of 'progress' to which all the nation-founding westerns subscribe: If technological and industrial expansion of the West was indeed the process through which The United States achieved its greatness, why does the 'before' in this process retain such popular appeal, and if the West is proof of progress, is it not a contradiction to use generic form to placate a divided post-depression nation on the brink of another conflict? Furthermore, how can a film celebrate the progress of the nation at the expense of its authentic heroes – the frontiersman, the cowboy, the gunfighter, even the outlaw – whose obsolescence is depicted, yet depended upon for identification and commercial appeal? Needless to say, these questions remain unanswered in the nation-founding tradition; the contradictions inherent in their treatment of history lie brazenly in the open.

Stagecoach stands slightly apart from the patriotic progressivism of the thirties – represented by the World's Fair returning to Chicago in 1933 announcing a 'Century of Progress' – and unbridled 'Americanism' of the pre-war A-western. Rather than celebrate the progress of the nation in terms of technological achievement or conquest, *Stagecoach* is concerned with the morality of the individual (albeit an obviously archetypal spread of representative individuals) in a paeon to motion as rebirth, aesthetic experience and a catalyst for the development of democracy and equality; the spectacle of

Monument Valley acting as a purifying filter and trial as the travellers make the perilous journey from Tonto to Lordsburg.

However, the importance of *Stagecoach* lies in its ability to sustain an alternative, less straightforwardly affirmative interpretation. Beginning in a town on the fringes of federal control, civilization is depicted, even at this frontier outpost, as oppressive and stultifying, with a local prostitute, Dallas, and an alcoholic physician, Doc Boone, being evicted by the pernicious members of the 'Law and Order League.' John Wayne's character, the Ringo Kid, is also an outcast, a falsely accused fugitive picked up by the travellers early into their journey. The historical thrust of *Stagecoach* therefore is subtly different from the typical nation-founding western. The band of outsiders travel away from civilization, not to establish a further outpost of the United States, but to escape the conditions of the nation's leading edge. *Stagecoach* in effect renders space as time with Ringo and Dallas travelling back to an earlier period in the historical development of the continent, finding happiness only in flight and motion as they ride across the border into Mexico.

The historical ambivalence of *Stagecoach* is summarised in its enigmatic concluding line. As Ringo and Dallas journey further into the past in pursuit of some probably illusory rural idyll in Mexico, Doc Boone remarks cheerily, "Well, they're saved from the blessings of civilization," before turning back to Lordsburg for a well-earned drink. Our interpretation of the film hinges somewhat on our reading of this line: Either we take the doctor at his word, accepting that although living in a society necessarily entails compromise and difficulty, civilization at least carries the potential to be a blessing; because society has made Ringo and Dallas outcasts, or because they are too naïve and impulsive to accept a compromised life within frontier civilization, they continue to retreat into the past and the wilderness in order to be themselves. Alternatively, we take Doc's words as profoundly ironic, expressing resigned disaffection with the very idea of civilization or progress; the so-called blessings are really shackles, fostering greedy bankers and oppressive 'Law and Order Leagues,' and denying Ringo and Dallas the chance to be themselves and to be with each other.²¹

Of course, we do not have to choose one interpretation over the other. There is a fundamental ambivalence to *Stagecoach* with Ford sustaining both a conventional progressive interpretation of history (the stagecoach as a vessel of democratic civilization, overcoming all obstacles in its way)

alongside a newfound nostalgic melancholy and cynicism about civilization and its effects on the individual. It is however this latter quality, this new nostalgic element, which has fed critical interest in *Stagecoach*, setting it apart from other successful westerns of the era.

Peter Stanfield suggests that the film won praise from the contemporary press for representing a new cinema which ‘sings the song of America’ and ‘reaffirms America’s institutions and ideas of individualism’ (2001:150). Such comments however, would apply just as well to nearly any thirties A-western. Stanfield’s survey of contemporary critics reveals that even in 1939, *Stagecoach* was deemed an exceptional film for its nostalgia for a ‘pre-self-conscious cinema,’ for its rejection of formal artifice, its return to a ‘grand old school of filmmaking’ and for its ‘democratic casting’ and the ‘humanising ordinariness’ of its characters (2001:148-9). It seems contemporary critics recognised that in form as well as in narrative content, *Stagecoach* was something of an artefact; a means of going back to an imagined past where the vitality of the individual and a vividness of feeling are very real. One review in particular, from *The Film Daily* enthuses in such a way that it recalls reviews of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West in its nostalgic desire for the real: ‘[*Stagecoach*] catches the spirit of the pioneering West and you feel every minute you watch these people are real, and that the things that are happening in real life right before your eyes’ (2001:149). These themes of individualism and nostalgia have been greatly expanded upon in subsequent scholarly analyses of the film – alongside an obligation to consider the film as the first major work of Ford and Wayne’s prolific collaboration – with a general tendency to highlight the film’s melancholy and creeping cynicism over the ways in which it belongs to the swell of ‘Americanism’ in late thirties Hollywood.

This critical tendency perhaps gives a false impression of the film as a whole, lending a disquieting thematic undercurrent disproportionate emphasis, while the overriding affirmative and comic tones are suppressed. Nonetheless, the fact that critics have paid such great attention to this conceptual germ, to the wellspring of the philosophical and affective current I am terming American Authenticity, is significant even if it arises only from the implications of a single enigmatic line of dialogue.

In what is perhaps the most extreme reading of these thematic undercurrents, Slotkin argues that the film stages an ‘ironic commentary on the progressive myth of the frontier’ by presenting America as ‘a dream that may dissolve as soon as we try to realise it’:

The progress achieved through the journey ordeal belongs only to the isolated individual – it has no social realisation, finds no historical home. Democracy, equality, responsibility, and solidarity are achieved – are visible – only in transit, only in pursuit of the goal. When the goal is achieved they dissolve and society lapses into habitual injustice, inequality, alienation, and hierarchy. Our only hope is to project a further frontier, a mythic space outside American space and American history, for the original possibilities of our frontier have [been] used up (1992:311 *sic*).

Slokin’s interpretation is clearly opposed to Bazin’s characterisation of *Stagecoach* as representing the classical perfection of the genre (2005:149), seeing it instead as a self-conscious and almost prematurely modernist commentary on the genre itself. Recasting the frontier as a predominantly imaginative space, Slotkin sees *Stagecoach* less as a dramatized piece of social history (with or without any contemporary reference or allegory), and more as a film about the history of an idea. Mostly a celebration of a time in which this idea was alive, vital and practiced, Ford’s innovation lies in his realisation of its darker implications: that core American values like democracy, equality and freedom may only be achieved in flight from civilization and tend to dissipate before they may be realised; that the pursuit of these values might be an historical phenomenon; and that the authentic individuals – represented by Ringo and Dallas – are somehow incompatible with established society, as progress only leads to stasis and reinforces familiar forms of alienation, hierarchy and oppression.

Pippin’s focus on *Stagecoach* as a ‘mythic representation of the American aspiration towards a form of politically meaningful equality’ effectively coheres with Slotkin’s interpretation, while moderating its tendency to reduce the film to its pessimistic undercurrents or implications (2010:3). Pippin agrees that the characters should be regarded as individuals – colourful and complex, with tarnished pasts and uncertain motives, united only in the pursuit of an authentic life elsewhere – but maintains that in their composition they are equally archetypal and ‘deliberately representative,’ designed to represent national oppositions of class, geography and moral virtue (2010:1-2). Therefore

their journey, while local and specific, comes loaded with wider archetypal or mythic associations and significance. Creating an ‘enforced dependency,’ the journey is the process through which class or moral distinctions are dissolved or overcome (2010:5). However, this does not make the stagecoach itself a vehicle of manifest destiny or the Jeffersonian idealisation of the frontier. As Perez argues, the film promotes a Turnerian breakdown of classes and snobberies along with a renewal of democratic spirit (there are several moments in which important decisions are put to a fair vote), rather than a natural aristocracy or form of social Darwinism promoted by Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, for instance (1998:240). A manifest destiny version of *Stagecoach* would see the weaker – physically, morally or otherwise – inhabitants naturally expunged throughout the journey, with the remainder effectively homogenised and primed to form the ideal society at their destination. There is no such simple logic to who survives the journey in Ford’s film and there is only a degree of – probably temporary – reconciliation over any sense of the travellers having coalesced or homogenised into a nationally representative group. What is more, it is evident that neither Tonto nor Lordsburg represent the possibility of an idyllic frontier life, as the mythic frontier is projected still further outside the bounds of the nation, ‘as if even America needs its own America, its own New World, if it is to continue to be America’ (Pippin, 2010:10).

What Ford offers in *Stagecoach*, argues Pippin, is ‘a picture of an aspiration [...] to moral equality’ (2010:9). Following Kant and Rousseau, Ford in his own way presents a case for the ‘inestimable value of the individual as such,’ that ‘for all inequalities in talent and accomplishment, no human life can be said to be worth more than any other because no price or measure of value can be placed on human worth’ (2010:7). However, this aspiration towards an American politics of moral equality is not some universal ideal or one designed to bolster the contemporary mood of ‘Americanism.’ The importance of *Stagecoach*, in terms of the cinematic articulation of American Authenticity, lies in its expressing these aspirations and ideals in the past tense; or more precisely, using the medium of film – the physicality of Monument Valley, the exhilarating pace and motion of the stagecoach, the star presence of John Wayne – to temporarily lend a ‘presentness’ to an aspiration which is presented as an artefact of the nineteenth century, to reanimate an idea for which any historical realisation has already been foreclosed. In Pippin’s terms we are shown ‘the promise of

reconciliation and a new moral order, but then also their unreality' (2010:10); and to paraphrase Slotkin, we journey back only for the dream to dissolve as we attempt to realise it. Rejecting the commonly held view that this melancholy seam makes Ford something of a nostalgic conservative, Perez argues that 'his nostalgia did not yearn for something that was once in place or is imagined to have been,' rather that he 'looked back to a past which looked forward to the future', cherishing the prospect, aspirations and striving of the past, not simply the past itself (1998:241). As Svetlana Boym has argued, nostalgia has its utopian dimensions, only they are no longer directed at the future; the nostalgic feels confined by time and space altogether, and expresses a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed (2001:xiii-iv).

If *Stagecoach* only hinted at an ambivalence towards the morality of civilization, the fulfilment of its nostalgic and pessimistic undertones would come with *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), as Ford dispensed with both conventionally progressive interpretations of history and affirmative narrative structures. The problem of American Authenticity – that is, the question of individual being in relation to historical progress – ceases to be a thematic undercurrent, and instead can be seen as the overt subject matter and source of meaning of the film, governing all aspects of its form and creating the most intensive cinematic interrogation of the concept. As William Pechter notes in an essay on Ford: 'the uniqueness of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* consists in its bringing to the surface what has so long lain covertly beneath the surface' (1978:348). As well as exploring the contradictions the thirties A-western tried to ignore, and expressing all the nostalgia and pessimism first suggested by Ringo and Dallas's flight from the 'blessings of civilization,' *Liberty Valance* also interrogated with a remarkable degree of self-consciousness the value and meaning of a mythologised past, and therefore its own place in relation to that generic tradition. Joseph McBride writes that this late stage of his career is marked by '[...] an increased level of self-consciousness in Ford's treatment of American history' and a 'didactic urgency' reflecting his 'growing disillusionment with America as it entered the turbulent 1960s' (2003:606).

Liberty Valance represents the western's modernist moment; the point at which Ford's self-referential genre revisionism and analysis of history in relation to memory and myth threatens to undermine and fragment generic form itself. The main way in which *Liberty Valance* foregrounds the

role of memory and encourages the audience to adopt a critical perspective on history is through its elliptical flashback structure. Whereas the sense of ‘going back’ in *Stagecoach* is entirely metaphorical, an effect of the journey away from civilization, *Liberty Valance* presents two versions of the frontier town Shinbone, drawing contrasts and explaining its development. The exact geographical and historical situation of the town is kept deliberately vague in order to suggest that its story is representative of many others, but one can assume that the narrative present takes place in the early twentieth century, with the flashback sequences taking place in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, in the era of territorial expansion in the Southwest impelled by Horace Greely’s command, “go West, young man,” quoted by Ranse Stoddard with a hint of irony as he narrates his passage to Shinbone.

The use of a flashback structure in a western is in itself unusual, more commonly suited to the pessimistic moods and fatalistic themes of film noir, with westerns typically opting for a straightforward linearity befitting themes of historical progress. Westerns which deploy nonlinear narrative structures, like *Pursued* (1947) or *Rancho Notorious* (1952), tend to be overtly inflected with aspects of visual style and moods associated with film noir, while narrative linearity is also one of the many generic characteristics subverted by Spaghetti westerns. *Liberty Valance* however, does not use flashbacks to encourage identification with an investigative protagonist piecing together a story (in the manner of film noir), as Ranse Stoddard is merely recounting the story of his rise to political power – the significance of Tom Doniphon, whose wake Ranse and his wife Hallie have returned to Shinbone to attend, is a mystery only to the newspapermen and to the audience – nor is it used as an exuberant stylistic device (as in the Spaghetti western), as it consists of a simple framing of the past with two present-day episodes (with the important exception of the brief flashback-within-a-flashback which reveals the reality of the duel between Ranse and Liberty). Its purpose, suggests Kitses, is to offer ‘a distance that if not Brechtian nevertheless provides a basis for contemplation of the Old West, and an enquiry into the question of how histories are made’:

Grounding the action of the film as a flashback forces us to relate the past, the robust early West and the western itself to a contemporary America. A tragic tone prevails: something irreplaceable has been lost. The structure underlines the role of memory: how does reverie

relate to history? What is the effect of remembering? How do we construct the past? [...] here Ford is looking back at characters who are themselves looking back, extending an invitation for the audience to join in contemplation, abstraction, analysis (2004:118).

In effect this framing of the past reinforces and makes explicit the redoubled historicity at the genre's core. Whereas any meaningful relation between *Stagecoach*, for instance, and contemporary America relies upon readings of its implications and potential allegories, *Liberty Valance* inserts a wedge between its audience and a sealed diegetic interpretation of history; a theoretical redoubled historicity becomes a literal narrative redoubling – Ford narrates a version of the past wherein a further past is constructed – meaning the Old West is no longer hermetically sealed off from the present. Therefore, the kind of questions to do with memory, constructing the past, and the relation between the past and the present suggested by Kitses, are built into the narration itself, essential to both the audience's comprehension of the story and interpretation of its meaning.

Liberty Valance begins with a picturesque shot of a locomotive winding its way through a green valley in the early morning sunshine. The train glides routinely into the pristine Shinbone station, casting moving shadows across the anxious and artificially aged face of Andy Devine. Though obviously a period setting, it is apparent in the opening sequence that the narrative present is not the Old West, but rather a vision of a prosperous and *modern* small town America, with an imposing church, telephone lines (not mere telegraph lines), grand looking whitewashed houses with verdant gardens and white picket fences, and townspeople dressed in urban attire. Aside from the horses and carriages, the scene has much in common with visions of brightly serene postwar suburbia in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) or Douglas Sirk's melodramas, in which outward prosperity betrays anxieties about stultifying white middle-class conformity, the loss of individual thought and emotional repression.

Indeed for all the technological progress and prosperity on display, the tone of the opening sequence is unmistakably elegiac, the atmosphere sterile and cheerless. The funereal tolling of the train's bell reverberates around an otherwise quiet and strangely depopulated town, while Ford's *mise-en-scène* is static and brightly lit, the camera maintaining a detached distance from the slightly stilted and statuesque performances of James Stewart, Vera Miles and Andy Devine. This mournful

atmosphere is reinforced by the conversation between the symbolically named Link and Hallie sitting in the buckboard. Link resignedly admits that he has not been elected as town marshal for years, while Hallie remarks about how much the town has changed with its new churches, schools and shops. Their performances are stiff and drawn, with Hallie in particular gazing into the distance with an almost parodic degree of regret and longing, her voice terse and wistful. During their conversation the camera tracks subtly, almost imperceptibly, closer to and around the pair, breaking the pattern of static compositions and lending their laments and drawn performances an emotional emphasis without resorting to a dramatic close-up. Link notes wearily that the railroad is responsible for the changes in the town, adding with a hint of hope that “the desert’s still the same,” before the couple silently ride off to see the cactus rose in bloom, the film’s potent symbol of the unrefined and unappreciated beauty that lies just outside the bounds of civilization (Fig.1).

In terms of narrative content, there is little in this opening sequence to suggest that *Liberty Valance* will set about subverting the genre’s progressive interpretation of history; sensitivity to issues of tone – that is, Ford’s treatment of the narrative present, an attitude towards the dramatic material conveyed through *mise-en-scène* and performance – and the resulting affective tenor or mood fostered by this tone is required to understand and read the contrasts between past and present the film generates. Read as a plot summary, Ford’s treatment of the narrative present and the attitude of Link and Hallie would be easily missed: For all the outward signs of progress, the town is devoid of life, hanging under a vague cloud of longing and mourning; something vital has been lost. The object of this mourning is soon revealed to be Tom Doniphon, an old friend lying in a pauper’s casket without his boots or gun-belt, but nevertheless, the mood which colours the town appears excessive. The question remains: If Tom Doniphon is the source of grief, what in life did he represent to justify the disenchantment with the present evident in the opening sequence?

The flashback begins as Ranse attempts to explain Doniphon’s significance to the reporters with an affected oratorical pomposity reflecting his years spent as senator. In an obvious allusion to Ford’s earlier film, the catalyst for Ranse’s remembrance is a dusty and cobweb covered stagecoach (“could be the same one,” he muses – a keen-eyed spectator might recognise it is *the* stagecoach from the 1939 film). The archaic-looking coach, long superseded by the railroad, reaffirms quite how

removed the narrative present is from the Old West, while adding the self-reflexive dimension of how far removed *Liberty Valance* – Ford’s penultimate western and meditation on ageing and time passing – is from the youthful exuberance and action of *Stagecoach* (Fig. 2). As the stagecoach directly triggers Ranse’s recollection of his journey to Shinbone as a young man, it also acts to raise questions about the fallibility of the narration: do we take the flashback as an objective retelling, or is it to be seen as filtered through the memory of Ranse or the imaginations of the reporters and therefore prone to nostalgia or exaggeration?

Regardless of whether it is to be read as distorted by memory, Shinbone’s past appears dramatically stylised, with low-key lighting and dynamic compositions contrasting with the staid and evenly lit present day sequences. Other than in name the town is unrecognisable, the social spaces of a raucous saloon, cantina, and restaurant replacing the station and the church as focal points. Whereas modern day Shinbone appeared sterile and eerily depopulated, this version is bustling and diverse, filled with the late night sounds of a honkytonk piano and a Mexican band; full of life, if slightly threatening and chaotic. Even Ford’s camera appears enlivened by the atmosphere, freed from the atrophic treatment of the present and able to take in the town with a series of tracking shots and pans.

By establishing a vivid contrast between the modern-day Shinbone, where Ranse is venerated, and a past where he, as an educated easterner with ideals of law and government, is mocked and bullied, the film effectively illustrates the extremities of Kitses’s ‘shifting antinomies.’ Robert B. Ray argues that *Liberty Valance* organises itself around ‘certain schematic oppositions’ which are gradually revealed, drawing a long series of oppositions which the film’s unusual structure serves to highlight and polarise (1985:220).²² Though *Liberty Valance* doubtless underlines and schematises some of the genre’s core thematic oppositions and conflicts, it also, as Ray argues, makes some attempt at ‘reconciling these divisions, showing the interpenetration of two sets of values, postures and lifestyles’ (1985:220).

Returning to Tom Doniphon, the centre of the mourning that hangs over the modern day segments, and the character whose meaning we are asked to find in Ranse’s recollections, it is clear that he is not idealised for his representing one side of a set of oppositions but for being the last of a kind who had the potential to reconcile these two sets of opposing values. The very fact that Tom is

played by John Wayne makes his character carry a weight of meaning by his association with a kind of mythic American individualism. As Garry Wills suggests, Wayne embodies the most fundamental myth of the archetypal American as ‘a displaced person [...] rootless but carrying the Centre in himself, a gyroscopic direction setter, a travelling norm’:

John Wayne is the most obvious recent embodiment of that American Adam – untrammelled, unspoiled, free to roam, breathing a larger air than the cramped men behind desks [...] In westerns, the easterner is a dude, comically encumbered by useless knowledge, ignorant of the basics, too crippled with theory to act. In him the instincts that lead to Wayne’s easy responses have been atrophied in the stale air of commerce or technology, in the conditioning to life on a smaller scale than the open range (1998:302, 311).

Wayne’s embodiment of American Authenticity – defined above, once more, through opposition, as the negative space of modern being – acquires a tragic dimension in *Liberty Valance*, as from the moment Ranse asks his name, we understand he has no place in modern Shinbone, his downfall confirmed (Wayne may have died heroically in other films, but never quietly of old age, in ignominy and outside the main narrative). Wayne’s star persona had hardened by 1962 into a ‘conscious anachronism’ (Wills, 1998:281), a symbol of passing times and values, but *Liberty Valance* denies the continued resilience of his anachronism.

Though Tom Doniphon is clearly another version of the Wayne ‘American Adam’ ideal, he is neither straightforwardly heroic nor designed to embody absolute oppositions of wilderness and individualism, just as Ranse is no simplistic figurehead of law and civilization. As Ray observes, Tom is ‘not entirely a man of the open range,’ living on a smallholding just outside of the town in which he is well respected and takes an active role in its fledgling democratic processes (1985:220). Were Tom a heroic loner, his absence from the present world would be less troubling; a case of a man utterly incompatible with, and inconceivable in, modern times. Instead, he represents a kind of mythic balance; a westerner with all the attributes of the ‘American Adam’ ideal, but one who is able to reconcile with and adapt to changing times – to statehood, modernity, and law – without sacrificing his organic wholeness. His decline therefore becomes a social and historical problem; the pervasive

mourning of the opening somewhat justified as the recognition of the end of any possibility of regaining this moment of balance.

If Tom shows signs of being able to reconcile himself with the emergent order, Lee Marvin as Liberty Valance resolutely resides in lawlessness and disorder, described by Tag Gallagher as a uniquely unambiguous character in Ford: 'a singular example of an absolutely one dimensional character: pure unadulterated violence and chaos without a hint of a redeeming feature' (1986:396). His impulsively violent and selfish tyranny over the town complicates any straightforward contrast between an authentic past and an inauthentic present. The problem is posed unavoidably by his name: Liberty, that most treasured of American values, is embodied at its most chaotic and destructively unfettered; Valance, suggesting 'valence' as in the bonds attached to liberty or, as Gallagher suggests, that 'the 'valence' of liberty depends upon force' (1985:392). Gallagher argues that there is an enunciated mirroring between Tom and Liberty – Ranse upon first meeting Tom even says "you're as bad as he is" – with both men standing for the use of personal force over institutionalised law and asking the question of Ranse, "what kind of man are you?" as a challenge to his naïve and unmasculine notions of justice (1985:392). The idea of liberty as represented by Wayne is not troubling because it is underpinned by his moral certitude (famously unsettled by his Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (1956), but this is an exceptional example which depends upon precisely this association of Wayne with a stringently moral liberty). Tom however is bonded covalently to the darker side of liberty, undeterred by morality and unable to compromise, represented by Liberty Valance. What is the value of individualism if it leaves room for the Liberty Valances of the world to impose their will and crush the liberty of others by force? In his analysis of the film, Kitses goes as far as to suggest that '*Liberty Valance* is Ford's profound indictment of that fundamental virtue' demonstrating the futility of absolute self-reliance if it allows the chaos of Liberty and the self-destructive solipsism of Tom, who is 'blind to the needs of his lawless historical moment' (2004:119). Such a view might underplay the extent to which Tom acts in the interests of the community, but nevertheless, Ford makes it clear that authentic existence cannot negate social existence.

The symbolic relation between these two heroes and the villain might be visualised as a triangle, with Ranse and Liberty represented by the two furthest points apart, and Tom completing the

shape, throughout the course of the film shifting his position closer to Ranse. Fittingly, the climactic conflict between these three characters is a triangulated piece of action, told from two different perspectives, and staged to accentuate its symbolic subtext. The confrontation between Ranse and Liberty takes place on the main street of the town, outside the saloon, where a sign announcing the town's first election hangs prominently. That it is the eve of the town's first step towards statehood emphasises Perez's observation that 'the reason the classical western showdown between the hero and villain takes place on the main street of the town is that the matter at stake is not merely personal but a public social matter' (1998:237). Their duel is personal, motivated by pride and anger, but also clearly symbolic with the apron-clad James Stewart and the gunslinging Lee Marvin at either end of the wooden sidewalk, each representing a set of opposed values which will decide the future of the town (Fig.3).

The first version of the showdown, the mythologised account, builds tension through a broadly conventional pattern of shot/reverse shots, with Ranse tentatively creeping towards the saloon and Liberty arrogantly goading him. This unusually chiaroscuro showdown – the low key lighting serving to further accentuate the symbolic nature of the duel, while hinting at a crucial obscurity – ends with Ranse implausibly shooting Liberty with his weaker left hand, who in the background of long shot from Ranse's point of view, collapses under the election sign in a silvery patch of light. In this version the action takes place in a straight line, between the straightforwardly opposing poles, with the meek and law-abiding resorting to 'civilizing' violence to secure a future where such showdowns are not necessary.

The second version, prefigured by Tom blowing expressionistically swirling smoke into Ranse's eyes, completes the symbolic triangle and complicates the simplistic progressivism of the legend. The flashback reveals it was Tom, concealed in the shadows in a long shot perpendicular to the main line of action but aligned through deep focus staging with Ranse, who shot Liberty with a rifle at the exact moment Ranse fired his pistol (Fig. 4). The action is revealed to have taken place offscreen in the 'unsafe space' opened up by *Psycho* two years earlier (Maltby, 2003:254-6). Gallagher writes that 'the flashback not only corrects Stoddard's notion of who killed Valance; it corrects a geometry that was incorrect in terms of allegory [...] both Ranse and Tom compromise

their principles: Stoddard by resorting to gun-force and taking the law into his own hands, Doniphon by violating chivalry' (1986:404). Analysing the way in which this flashback not only dismisses the mythologised version of events, but contradicts and disrupts the classical form of the shooting, Ray argues that *Liberty Valance* represents a weakening of the reconciliatory and affirmative form of classical Hollywood cinema itself as 'the ideological mechanism momentarily surfaces':

Liberty Valance's crucial revelation of Tom's role in Valance's death discredited the most basic figure in Classic Hollywood's formal paradigm – the shot-reverse shot. The audience's acceptance of this figure had always depended on the tacit guarantee that nothing narratively important lay outside the seam of significance isolated from the larger space by shot-reverse shot patterns [...] In demonstrating that crucial narrative developments could take place outside the seam established by such a classically rigorous sequence, Doniphon's confession undermined the invisible style itself, exposing the guarantee on which its fundamental figure rested as mere cinematic convention (1985:233, 227).

Thus the thematic disruption caused by the revelatory flashback is underscored by a formal disruption which denies the neat version of events described by the legend, raises a number of questions and contradictions, and implicates the film's narration itself in this deception. Ransome might have abandoned his idealism within traditional reconciliatory patterns (imbibing a homeopathic dose of Western violence in order to set the town on the path to law and civilization) but the revelation that his successful political career and the prosperity of the town were founded upon a lie is unresolvable (especially given that the actual shooter is more of an assassin), leaving only the film's famously inconclusive line about willing self-deception: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

This suggestive line, much like the "blessings of civilization" at the end of *Stagecoach* has been the source of much scholarly debate, particularly among those critics inclined to read westerns as allegories of contemporary American politics. Stephen McVeigh, for instance, sees the line as an acceptance of 'the necessity of public myth as a social adhesive', suggesting that 'regardless of democratic process, a major crisis requires heroic leadership, even if it is just an image of such leadership' (2007:159-60). He draws on the work of Alan Nadel, who reads the film as an allegory of containment narratives in U.S foreign policy; a justification of the need to resort to antidemocratic

measures in order to secure democracy (1996:194). These arguments however tend to ignore the mood and tone of modern day sequences and the degree of self-consciousness and irony contained in the editor's dictum.²³ As Pippin argues, *Liberty Valance* clearly demonstrates that 'one of the psychological requirements for a shared political identification is a heroizing narrative about a common origin and the bravery and sacrifices of the original founders'; but demonstrating the importance of public myths does not equate to justifying their falsehoods. Pippin stresses that the film, as a work of 'mythological modernism,' suggests the inevitability of the truth being revealed and the damaging effects of a society living under a lie:

It blinds us to the less legendary but more everyday and real accomplishments of those forgotten by such accounts and especially to those victimised by such a founding [...] And most of all such self-inflating stories blind us to what *we* have lost, what was given up, in a transition to a particular form of civilized authority, a commercial republic (2010:97).

Liberty Valance is a film structured around precisely this question of 'what we have lost' and in creating the impression of a sterile and joyless modern America can hardly be seen to recommend the powers of public myth as a 'social adhesive.' Moreover, by exposing both the symbolic content of its particular legend and the forms in which it might be contained, one could even go so far as to say *Liberty Valance* self-reflexively incites the active deconstruction of generic myths.

As for the question of what was lost or given up, the film offers no simple answers that are not in themselves problematized; but we are inevitably drawn back to an authentic point of balance represented by Tom Doniphon as the shifting mediator between Liberty and Ranse, to the possibility of a social form of liberty, to a moral individualism. Ray argues that *Liberty Valance* implies the necessity of choosing between two sets of incompatible values, but that 'the inherent equivocalness of both sets of values made any such choice treacherous' (1985:236). The film makes clear that neither the order represented by Ranse or the wildness of Liberty/Tom are sufficient for authentic existence, but that history had chosen the former. Liberty and Tom are not unquestioningly mourned but they are the missing sides of a triangle of interpenetrating values that represented a choice. 'Thus the ironic truth to the shot, "Liberty's dead!" Valance as long as he lived, represented a potential for either order

to succeed. His perpetuation in the world represented an alternative between liberty and order' (Gallagher, 1986:406).

Liberty Valance mourns the foreclosed possibility of a mythic balance between wilderness and civilization by expanding upon the pessimistic nostalgic utopianism first implied by *Stagecoach*. Its uniqueness lies not only in its initiating the trend for westerns to offer excoriating visions of historical progress and civilization, but in its refusal of the corollary of that trend, which is to idealise the freedom implied by the pre-modern wilderness. As Ray concludes, the progressive vision was replaced by 'a new nostalgia, not merely for the precivilized state, but for the brief moment when *both* were possible, the power and freedom of Tom, the decency and wisdom of Ranse' (1985:238). The usefulness of *Liberty Valance* to the present work is its articulating authenticity as a *problem* within the western. Authenticity is conceived as a 'supreme point' of balance between wilderness and civilization, unattainable as it is realised only in remembrance, and forming the conceptual core of the contradictory nostalgic/oppositional – pessimistic/utopian reflex of American westerns.²⁴

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance serves as a jumping off point for this thesis; foregrounding the problem of authenticity – the ambivalence about American modernization and its effects on the individual, the anxious relationship with the past arising at times of crisis, and a mood of nostalgic utopianism – it pulls an enduring undercurrent into explicit focus. In the year of its release authenticity was poised to become a central ideal, preoccupation and point of contestation in American political and cultural life over the coming decade. This thesis will explore the vectors of authenticity through the tumultuous industrial, social and political upheavals of the sixties and early seventies, examining the westerns of the Hollywood Renaissance period against the backdrop of the New Left and popular counterculture. However, if this thesis is to avoid the problems of seeing films as mirrors of the times, if it is to do justice to the redoubled historicity I have argued is essential to understanding the genre, and explore the longstanding currents of political philosophy and aesthetics, the history of American Authenticity first needs to be explored in greater detail outside of the context of cinema. I began this chapter by describing the emergence of a nostalgically inflected notion of authenticity in the mass culture of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair before arguing that authenticity has been central the concept in American culture's expression about the West. Having demonstrated the

value of a concept marginalized by dominant trends in western genre criticism, it is now necessary to ask how and why such a concept developed in American culture and, as authenticity appears to be a modern preoccupation, to investigate its development in the context of American modernization.

Rousseau Goes West: The Origins of American Authenticity

The apparent tension between the two epigraphs at the beginning of this chapter is telling about the nature of American Authenticity as it developed throughout the nineteenth century. The first is an extract from the poet, philosopher and transcendentalist author Henry David Thoreau's famous essay 'Walking.' Published posthumously in 1862, a century before *Liberty Valance*, the essay expresses a similar autumnal nostalgia for the possibilities of the West and trepidation in the face of advancing urban civilization. Thoreau speaks of a subtle magnetism that lures him westward:

Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free. Thither no business leads me. It is hard for me to believe that I shall find fair landscapes, or sufficient wildness and freedom behind the Eastern horizon. I am not excited by the prospect of a walk thither; but I believe that the forest which I see in the western horizon stretches uninterruptedly toward the setting sun, and there are no towns nor cities in it of consequence to disturb me. Let me live where I will, on this side is the city, on that the wilderness, and ever I am leaving the city more and more, and withdrawing into the wilderness (2006:77).

Here Thoreau associates the idea of the West with the wildness and freedom that come from contact with nature, with aesthetic beauty, and with liberation from the restraints of European civilization and culture – 'I must walk towards Oregon and not towards Europe' he later states – before noting that his personal attraction towards the western region is mirrored by the movement of the nation as a whole. So far, perhaps, these are not entirely original sentiments: the association of the West with freedom and natural beauty is as common to the political rhetoric of presidents Jefferson and Jackson, the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, the Hudson River school of landscape painting, and the work of economic boosters, as it is to the American transcendentalist group.

Perhaps no one is more critical of these Romantic ideas about the West than D. H. Lawrence in the introduction to his essays on American literature published in 1923. In their ‘rebellion against the old parenthood in Europe,’ as he puts it, and their exalting in ideas of freedom, Lawrence finds only evidence of alienation from the ‘deepest whole self of man’ or an idealistic bad faith:

Men are free when they belong to a believing community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled perhaps unrealized purpose. Not when they are escaping to some Wild West. The most unfree souls go West, and shout freedom. Men are freest when they are most unconscious of freedom. The shout is always a rattling of chains, always was (1971:12).

Thoreau’s ode to the freedom, wildness and the self-enlarging potential of the West, and Lawrence’s association of such ideas with a desperate quest for wholeness and freedom in rebellion against European culture are clearly opposed, but they might not be altogether incompatible; they might be conceived as a dialectic which defines the contours and development of American Authenticity.

A later passage from ‘Walking,’ in which Thoreau compares his experience of viewing two panorama attractions, subtly distinguishes Thoreau’s thought from the more mainstream currents of exceptionalism and manifest destiny suggested by his idealistic description of the course of the nation. Moving panoramas were a hugely popular – and obviously protocinematic – medium in the nineteenth century, featuring landscape paintings of vast dimensions, unreeling slowly with lighting effects, musical accompaniment and narration to simulate epic journeys, with the Mississippi River being the most popular theme (Comment, 1999:63). The frontier, rather than views of the Old World, proved to be the most lucrative subject matter for the moving panorama; the form was well suited to the public’s curiosity about the unknowable expanses of the West and ‘anticipated, in art, the speed of travel which the railroads would soon make a reality’ (Oettermann, 1997:323). Viewing the first panorama, depicting a Rhine region which appeared like ‘a dream of the Middle Ages’ with castles and ruins, Thoreau writes he ‘floated along under a spell of enchantment, as if [...] transported to a heroic age, and breathed an atmosphere of chivalry’ (2006:80). A comparison of this vision of the old world with a panorama of the Mississippi River produces a revelation: he finds no similar heroic age, as ‘the famous castles were yet to be laid, and the famous bridges were to be yet thrown over the river’, but states emphatically ‘*this was the heroic age itself*, though we know it not, for the hero is commonly

the simplest and obscurest of men' (original emphasis). Even in the 1860s, Thoreau wrote about an age of heroic simplicity in the West in the past tense. Moreover, it is significant that this landscape is not described as an untainted wilderness, but as existing on the cusp of modernization with steamboats carrying lumber, cities beginning to rise and Indians already retreating further to the West. That Thoreau experiences this heroic age of the West with its promise of wholeness and a sense of being, not in time experienced in actual nature, as had inspired so much of his earlier writing – in *Walden*, most famously – but vicariously by observing a panorama, suggests his awareness that one realises authenticity only at the moment of its passing.

This nostalgic utopianism is confirmed in the following passage, in which Thoreau, after pausing for dramatic effect states: 'The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World' (2006:80). Not only is the West not an easily defined geographical region in Thoreau – fellow transcendentalist Emerson also only spoke ambiguously of the 'far-west' – it is synonymous with all wildness; and by wildness Thoreau speaks as much about a quality of mind or sense of self derived from physical contact with nature as he does about geography. With the decline of the physical wilderness, so too the intellectual and spiritual possibilities of the American mind are impoverished. By recognising this disparity between the progress and growth of the nation and the possibilities for authentic lives within it, Thoreau in particular initiated a split between America and the United States, and is the unacknowledged architect of American Authenticity. However, in order to properly theorise the development and specificity of American Authenticity and before fully resolving the tension between Thoreau's 'westward I go free,' and D. H. Lawrence's 'the most unfree souls go west,' it is necessary to go back to the old world, and to the emergence of modern subjectivity itself.

A sketch of the etymology of 'authenticity' can help to explain the importance of the concept in modernity, charting its rise from straightforward term to a multifaceted and complex concept, quality of being and distinctively modern ideal. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the word 'authentic' can be traced back to the fourteenth century. Predominantly used in a legal or ecclesiastical context, the word denoted the possession of 'original or inherent authority' and therefore the entitlement of 'obedience and respect' as well as being in accordance with fact,

trustworthy or of established credit. This sense of the word is still held today, with authenticity commonly inferring originality and veracity.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ‘authentic’ – along with ‘authenticity,’ the state or quality of being authentic – accumulates new meanings and usages which point both to the word’s proliferation and to a shift in the cultures deploying it. ‘Authentic’ comes to denote wider and more ambiguous terms like ‘real’ and ‘actual’, referring to that which is self-originated, acting of itself, as being ‘what it professes in origin or authorship’, and even a form of perfect cadence in musical terminology. Alongside older and comparatively banal and hierarchical senses of having authority and facticity, authenticity acquires associations with higher notions of reality, truth, self and harmony. Why does authenticity become elevated from a simple term to an all-encompassing concept during the epochal transition to the modern age in Western culture?

This question is addressed by Lionel Trilling’s work *Sincerity and Authenticity*, in which he provides an historical account of the rise of its titular concepts in Western literature. At a certain point in history, Trilling suggests, ‘the moral life of Europe added to itself a new element, the state or quality we call sincerity’ (1972:2). Citing Polonius’s advice to Laertes in *Hamlet* (“This above all: to thine own self be true. And it doth follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man”), as a watershed moment, Trilling suggests sincerity as a new and strenuous virtue, hitherto taken for granted in culture (1972:3). With sincerity there emerges a recognition of the self; that one can not only be false to others, one might also be false to oneself. Trilling argues that a new found stress on sincerity arose as an effect of the decline of feudalism and a decisive increase in social mobility in sixteenth century England and France. This new moral element also initiates a problem: with the subject no longer limited to a single inherited and lifelong role, but required to fulfil and aspire to all manner of roles in a sincere manner, there is the possibility that sincerity itself might be insincere: ‘we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act out the part of the sincere person, with the result that the judgement may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic (Trilling, 1972:11).

If sincerity can be inauthentic, reduced to another form of semblance, personae, or falsehood and only having meaning in dialogue with others (it means very little to say ‘I am sincere’), then

authenticity emerges as a successive ideal, more intensive and less dependent on social interaction.

Trilling poses authenticity's development as a more rigorous, pervasive, and oppositional concept that grew out of sincerity:

The word 'authenticity comes so readily to the tongue these days and in so many connections that it may well resist such efforts of definition [...] for the present I can rely on it suggesting a more strenuous moral experience than 'sincerity' does, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man's place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life (1972:11).

Epigrammatically put, authenticity is necessarily sincere, but sincerity is not necessarily authentic. It follows that if sincerity is a moral ideal to help the individual more effectively navigate modern social life with its multifarious roles, authenticity is more likely to erect a wall around the self, and to dismiss the demands of social life with its roles, manners and rituals altogether. The comparative psychological and spiritual depth of authenticity, its oppositional tendencies, and its capacity for darkness as well as idealism, has allowed it to capture the imagination of Western culture, rendering sincerity hollow and superficial by comparison.

Thinking about authenticity as a modern concept requires us to assume that before modernity there was little mass awareness or cultural exploration of the self as a thing itself, with depths beneath the surface layers of social standing or tangible achievements. 'At a certain point in history men became individuals,' Trilling states, the opening up of interiority evidenced by the rise of autobiography, self-portraiture, and the mass manufacturing of mirrors, to name but a few early manifestations of the movement towards Western culture's preoccupation with the self (1972:24). If sincerity is the product of the early stages of this process in the pre or early modern eras, an ideal arising from the more complex forms of social interaction, authenticity develops out of the recognition of modernity as an unstoppable force. Scholars of culture, politics and philosophy broadly agree: at the end of the eighteenth century individuality becomes a problem; the self, an uncharted region to go along with various geographical, scientific and social frontiers. As Charles Taylor writes in his work, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, the concept arises as a new form of individualism and morality in the late eighteenth century as 'a part of the massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new form

of inwardness in which we begin to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths' (1991:26). Marshall Berman finds its point of origin earlier but describes the concept similarly as a deep and pervasive theme of the Romantic age: 'a leitmotif in Western culture since early in the eighteenth century, when men began to feel modernization as an irreversible historical force, and to think systematically about its human potentialities' (2009:xvii). For Alessandro Ferrara, the emergence of authenticity – wherever we pinpoint the historical moment – is precisely what defines the transition from the early modern to contemporary modernity, stating that autonomy (a concept not dissimilar to Trilling's sincerity) is the '*idée-force*' of early modernity in everything from science to aesthetics, and 'contemporary modernity begins at whichever point in history we locate the rise of authenticity to an equivalent role' (1993:24). That authenticity is an idea born at the tipping point of modernization and that it constitutes a more intensive and thoroughgoing recognition of individual subjectivity, are reasonably consensual principles, but ones that will need retuning in a specifically American frequency in due course. Beforehand it is necessary to ask *how* this radical new element in European culture was initially theorised and expressed by its most influential and innovative proponent.

For most scholars writing about authenticity the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau is of the upmost importance. Ferrara argues that the theme of authenticity has unfolded within a tradition of thought which has its origins precisely with Rousseau and which through Schiller and the early Romantics, through Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger has come to influence contemporary culture (1993:24). Berman might trace authenticity – or his synonymous phrase 'radical individualism' – back further, to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721), but argues that Rousseau 'explored the tensions between the self and the world with a depth, an intensity, an imaginative vision that no one ever matched' (2009:75). Whether we regard Rousseau as the author of authenticity or simply its most innovative proponent, influentially articulating and giving a name to radical shifts already underway in culture, his work can be conceived as a starting point for all subsequent variations of the theme, making him a necessary progenitor of American Authenticity (Taylor, 1991:27).

Central to Rousseau's thought is the idea that man is naturally good but is corrupted by society with its moral and political inequalities (Wokler, 2001:45). 'The savage lives in himself; the

man accustomed to the ways of society is always outside himself and knows only how to live in the opinions of others,' Rousseau concludes, in *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1992:70). What sociable man has altogether lost, in Rousseau's somewhat dystopian perspective on the modern world, is the feeling of individual existence itself. Whereas the savage, 'breathes nothing but repose and freedom' the citizen by contrast is a slave to their work, playacting social roles, living only in the opinions of others, and rushing towards death; 'this is not the original state of man [...] this is only the spirit of society, and the inequality that society engenders' (Rousseau, 1992:70). Authenticity – or to use Rousseau's phrase, which he passed on to Wordsworth, 'the sentiment of being' – is a lapsed state identified with natural man and as Trilling argues, a polemical concept which posits a natural strength sapped by modern society, 'that the circumference of the self keep unbroken, that the person be an integer, impenetrable, perdurable, and autonomous in being if not in action' (1972:99). The primary symbol in Rousseau's work for the Enlightenment society which repressed the sentiment of being was the veil or the mask. Man's true nature, from which the feeling of existence might be recovered, is hidden behind layers of accumulated self-concealment, the product of living outside oneself (Berman, 2009:83). 'At the apex of social evolution in the Parisian society of his times' writes Ferrara, 'Rousseau saw a gallery of masks under which no person existed any longer' (1993:48). The 'state of nature' represented an unrecoverable unity and enlarged sense of self before the development of all the unnatural phenomena of society, with property, vanity, reason and pride among the most detrimental of characteristics (Cooper, 1999:39).

Despite his distaste for modern society, with its inequality, inauthenticity and self-alienation, and his exalting ideas of a pre-historic state of nature as an antidote to these modern woes, most agree that Rousseau was no straightforward primitivist. The state of nature refers not to an achievable end but to a supposed point of origin which is unrecoverable; a measure of contemporary alienation, rather than an intended solution. Rousseau admitted that wholly natural man lived in a 'state of animality', not befitting human beings (Cooper, 1999:39). Authenticity in Rousseau is less a call to return to a pre-historic state of nature – such a return if possible would hardly be natural – but rather a recognition that certain features of social evolution, accelerated and intensified by modernity, have contributed to increasingly joyless and inauthentic lives, to which the imagined unity of natural

subjectivity is posited as a potentially destabilising solution. As Berman puts it, ‘authenticity is not a refusal of the modern or a retreat to savage nature; it is the ability to be oneself in the midst of modernity’ (2009:168). Rousseau’s authenticity might be seen as the invention of a mythic balance: the state of nature, with its sentiment of being, inherent freedom and psychic unity, and a society which provides all the benefits of human interaction without submitting the self to the ravages of rapid growth, competitiveness or social mores. The possibility of some reconciliation between the state of nature and society is expressed by Rousseau by the precarious symbol of the tree growing beside the highway, or by the supposed idyllic Golden Age of nascent societies (Cooper, 1999:50).

Rousseau’s authenticity, a decidedly pessimistic and nostalgic ideal of the unified self living closer to nature, forged in response to the perceived inauthenticity of the modern world, is a clear forerunner of American Authenticity as it developed in the nineteenth century. However, Rousseau’s thought cannot simply be transposed directly onto an American context; Clarens or Geneva cannot be substituted for a frontier town. The enduring fascination with Rousseau lies in his singularly personal and confessional qualities, with his search for individual unity as he put it in *Emile* ‘to be me without contradiction, without division,’ over the relevance of his thought in different contexts. If the aspects of his work which I have briefly summarised – the conception of the self outside of society, a suspicion of modernity and a preoccupation with some lost state of nature – seem to anticipate the development of similar ideas in American culture, it is less evidence of a direct influence than it is telling of a pattern of highly individualistic modern thought arising in response to periods of intense change.

Before illustrating how Rousseauian thought developed in an American context, it is necessary to survey the influence of Rousseau’s authenticity in European culture, in order for American Authenticity to be meaningfully differentiated from similar intellectual currents in European culture. For Martin Jay, from whose *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* this chapter borrows its title, as well as the idea that concepts adventure through culture (as well as individual works being adventures, attempts to strike out into new artistic or intellectual territory), Rousseau is a complex and ambivalent precursor of a different, yet related concept, which can help to nuance authenticity. Jay describes the notion of ‘totality,’ like authenticity

emerging out of the enlightenment as a concept with ‘positive associations such as harmony, plenitude, coherence, order and fulfilment, a ‘whole feeling’ or metaphysical pathos’ which gains currency as a ‘God term’ as it journeys through Marxist discourse (1984:21-24). Totality remains an article of common faith among Western Marxists, as an optimistic concept which promises a holistic solution to modern dilemmas. Rousseau is distinguished from the Marxist thinkers he influenced, according to Jay, because for the most part he ‘pursued a personal totality’ and that with the exception of *The Social Contract*, he ‘nostalgically looked back to the semi-primitiveness of a lost age, before the corruption of civilization, for his model of wholeness’ (1984:42). Inspired by the same dilemmas, Rousseau’s personal totality differs from totality in Marxism in its inwardness, resignation and regressive or nostalgic tendencies. ‘Having no faith in progress’ Jay suggests, ‘Rousseau was a moralist without the hope that his utopia might be realised’ (1984:42). Authenticity and totality are in a sense the same ideal – at the very least they are inspired by the same conditions – but they are diametrically opposed in terms of their temporality, imagined location, potential solution, and affective tenor: Totality is a future utopia, authenticity the utopia of some unrecoverable past; totality imagines a harmonious collective (even an ideal urban environment), authenticity imagines a harmonious individual (at its most collective, a small rural community); totality is teleological (the object at the end of a struggle), authenticity is nostalgic or mournful, more often conceived as an irrevocable loss than an achievable end.

For all their differences, authenticity and totality share a certain historical self-consciousness or zeitgeist quality. Rousseau, for all his personal confessions is commonly remembered as the bellwether figure who predicted the French Revolution, even if his attitude towards history was, as most scholars agree, decidedly pessimistic, if prescient.²⁵ Nonetheless, even if authenticity lacks the progressive optimism of totality in the Marxist tradition, the concept speaks as much about the spirit of the times and the prevailing social and cultural climate that shapes it as it does to ideals or ends. Berman argues accordingly that the concept is not stable or universal but moulded in response to actual conditions: ‘the search for authenticity, nearly everywhere we find it in modern times, is bound up with a rejection of things as they are’ (2009:xxvii). Put differently, ideals like authenticity are the negative images of, and therefore key to understanding, the anxieties of the times.

However, if authenticity is an ideal central to modern culture, if the vocabulary of authenticity pervades modern language, and if radical individualism has embedded itself in all Western political cultures in one form or another, one arrives at a concept too pervasive and nonspecific to reveal anything meaningful about specific cultural contexts. Typologies and histories of different kinds of authenticity developing in specific cultural contexts are needed for the concept to be useful as an interpretive tool. Thus far I have set out the broad features of American Authenticity, a concept popularised at the culmination of the modernization of the United States as represented by the Columbian Exposition but with roots earlier in the nineteenth century and growing out of earlier European thought. I propose that the concept can function as a missing link in the analysis of western films, helping explain the genre in relation to longstanding traditions in American culture as well as its changing expressions in relation to contemporary social and political contexts. It is therefore a vital, if bordering on tautological point, that American Authenticity must be a concept defined by its development in American culture. No matter how relevant or universally applicable Rousseau's ideas may be, the majority of his work was penned before the United States even existed, and long before it began to make inroads into the West. Yet equally, one must not blindly follow Turner and assume that American culture was entirely stripped of its European baggage in the nineteenth century.

Cultural concepts like authenticity are formed by conditions. If, as a starting point we assume that the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the development of distinctive forms of utopian thought in Europe and eventually, in America, with the futuristic and holistic totality capturing the imagination of European Marxism and the nostalgic personal totality of Romanticism as two poles on an axis, it is necessary to ask: how were the conditions in the young United States different as to privilege Romantic sentiment-of-being thought over totalising Marxist utopianism developing in European nations? Charles Taylor offers a thesis as to three general 'modern malaises' that give rise to notions of authenticity: 'features of our culture and society that people experience as a loss or decline' (1991:1). All Western societies have experienced these three malaises to some extent, but one can suppose not equally; the specificities of different societies at different stages in their historical development mean that more weight and influence can be attached to a specific malaise, therefore lending that culture's ideal of authenticity a distinctive emphasis or accent. Taylor gives the three

malaises as follows, with each referring to the moral, economic and political spheres of modern life respectively:

- *Individualism* – Paradoxically the defining achievement of modern civilization, it is also a source of worry and ambivalence. Breaking loose from older moral horizons, people lose any sense of their part in a larger cosmic order, leading to the ‘disenchantment of the world’. The dark side of individualism is revealed as a centring on the self which both flattens and narrows our lives, which makes them poorer in meaning and less concerned with others or society (1991:2-4).
- *The Primacy of Instrumental Reason* – The supremacy of rationalities of economic efficiency, the commodification of the natural world, the prestige and aura of new technologies, rapid exchange and competition in capitalist development all contributing to the sense, in Marx’s famous phrase, that ‘all that is solid melts into air’ (1991:4-7).
- *The Loss of Political Freedom* – The increasing difficulty to sustain individual lifestyles, with few actively participating in politics, giving rise to ‘soft despotism’ and a population of atomised and self-absorbed individuals, easily coerced (1991:8-9)

These general malaises are best seen as parts of a single complex rather than wholly discrete concerns. However, the individual reflecting upon the dilemmas of modernity – whether for the purposes of art, philosophy or politics – does not necessarily consider an interrelated whole or accept all of the features outlined above; a specific malaise might be felt particularly keenly, while others might go unrecognised.

Totality in European Marxism is a holistic ideal which attempts to resolve all three malaises in their entirety. Rather than focussing on one specific aspect of modernity, it attempts to analyse modernity longitudinally, to understand the whole and project a total solution in the form of a socialist utopia into the future. Whereas in Europe such thought found practical expression in the political cultures of several nations, in America, totality did not become a similarly privileged concept and therefore Marxism did not develop into a significant political ideology. Daniel Bell, in his influential study *Marxian Socialism in the United States*, surveys the causes of this relative lack of class

consciousness and Marxist thought – including the presence of the frontier itself, unusual opportunities for social ascent (at least for white Americans), the heterogeneity created by successive waves of immigration, and the ‘gift’ of the ballot for workers – concluding that ‘the failure of the socialist movement in the United States is rooted in its inability to resolve a basic dilemma of ethics and politics [...] it was trapped by the unhappy position of living in but not of the world’ (1996:4-5). In other words, despite being potentially fertile ground for socialist development, such ideas failed to gain mass acceptance and unlike in Europe, Marxist thought had little dialogue with the public. Even Marxist historians such as Paul Buhle, while seeking to stress the importance of immigrant socialism and black radicalism on American society, admit that Marxist ideas never became in any significant way hegemonic (1991:12). For Marx and Engels, pre-Civil War America posed an ideological threat to European socialism, as the image of a vast Golden Land of opportunity tempted potentially revolutionary workers into emigration, easing pressure on capitalism (1991:20). However false this impression of a Golden Land may have been, one can suppose that in the nineteenth century at least, the belief in America itself was enough not to need socialism. Suggestively, Buhle also posits the thesis that European Marxism served to ‘eradicate pre-capitalist remnants, whereas American radicalism has long faced the future that lay beyond’ (1991:12).

This thesis goes some way to explaining the preference for Romantic personal totality in America and accords with Ferrara’s association of authenticity (in a European context) with the transition from early modernity to contemporary modernity. In the United States generally, but especially in the American West, and from the perspective of white civilization, there is no substantive pre-capitalism or early modernity. While Rousseau was busy contemplating the changing nature of modernity in Paris, the West was still almost entirely unsettled by non-indigenous America; modernization in the West was not a change in society, it was the construction of society itself. Self-alienation in the traditional society, Berman argues, was created by a static society full of inscribed or inherited roles (2009:98). Seeking to sweep away the remnants of this rigidly stratified society as well as resolve newer modern forms of alienation, authenticity in Europe had to be totalitarian (in the broadest sense of the word) and progressive; the past and the present were equally untenable. The West however had no ‘traditional society’ in these terms, and with no feudal system, monarchy or

early modernity to clear away, its past became a void, a negative space ready to be filled with idealistic images of solutions to modern dilemmas.

Regardless of whether the expansive continent was in any sense ‘free land’ in actuality, the idea of the West had a major impact on American thought. Thinking about Taylor’s modern malaises in a nineteenth century American context, it is clear that individualism has traditionally been less of a cause for ambivalence or malaise in American culture, owing at least in part to the frontier and associated ideas of self-determination and freedom. It is the second malaise – the primacy of instrumental reason, comprised of anxieties about mechanisation, overpopulation and the restriction of space and movement – I suggest, which has been most keenly felt by Americans, and which has shaped the specific qualities of American Authenticity. As Trilling points out, ‘anxiety about mechanization, is a key component in nineteenth century culture, fostering the desire for authenticity [...] the inauthentic becomes equated with the mechanical and thus, the chief criterion of the authentic becomes the natural’ (1972:126). For a nation which defined itself with images of rural idylls, even before Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark on their famous expedition, the malaise of mechanization was bound to be more of an influence on American cultural concepts than in Europe, where the other malaises were equally pressing. Henry Nash Smith, in his influential work *Virgin Land* explains that ‘the myth of the garden was already implicit in the iridescent eighteenth century vision of continental American empire’ but ironically, the realisation of this vision would depend upon all the mechanical and industrial forces associated with the East and the Old World:

When the new economic and technological forces, especially the power of steam working through the river boats and locomotives had done their work, the garden was no longer a garden. But the image of an agricultural paradise in the West, embodying group memories of an earlier, a simpler and, it was believed, a happier state of society, long survived as a force in American thought and politics. So powerful and vivid was the image that down to the very end of the nineteenth century it continued to seem a representation, in Whitman’s words, of the core of the nation, “the real genuine America” (1971:124).²⁶

That an image of nature inspired by the West was deemed, long before Turner’s address at the Columbian Exposition, to be the authentic image of America, in political rhetoric as in national

theology, in commerce as in dime novels, points to the need to disentangle nature in American Authenticity from more mainstream currents; the presence of natural imagery alone does not constitute a concern with authenticity. In the nineteenth century, writes Robert Hughes, 'Nature became America's national myth, and the act of painting it an assertion of national identity' (1997:138). As Martin Lefebvre writes, only in the nineteenth century landscape becomes a 'dominant art,' emancipated 'from its supporting role as background or setting to events and characters,' and emerging 'as a completely distinct aesthetic object' (2006:23). Alexis de Tocqueville noted in the early 1830s that a vast and growing agricultural empire in the interior of the continent was a collective representation and poetic idea that defined the promise of American life (Smith, 1971:123); the expansionist rhetoric of presidents Jefferson and Jackson drew on the picturesque to render a view of the West as a landscape in which God's design for the settlement of the continent by white civilization could be inferred (Graebner, 1968; Nash, 1973; Fresonke, 2003); boosters and promoters boasted that Western lands were untainted Edenic paradises and promised lands (Wrobel, 2011); and the Eastern imagination was fed on Western heroes like Davey Crockett and Natty Bumppo and images of spectacular national assets of landscape in novels and landscape painting (Johnson, 2007; Nobles, 1997). That this national obsession with nature was fostered in the East supports the idea that the malaise of mechanisation and urbanisation fed the American imagination, but also points to the problem of extricating American Authenticity from economic boosterism, expansionist rhetoric and boastful nationalism.

Far from being a uniquely American preoccupation, the national obsession with nature rendered in opposition to the experience of rapidly accelerating modernity had its origins in European culture. The very idea of landscape as a cultural production distinct from mere territory was imported from Europe; Thomas Cole, perhaps the most influential landscape painter, and an English import himself, brought Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime and ideas of the picturesque landscape into America (Hughes, 1997:142). Roderick Nash suggests that wilderness appreciation, as opposed to the pre-modern instinctive fear of a threatening nature, began in the cities: 'the literary gentleman wielding a pen, not the pioneer with his axe, made the first gestures of resistance against strong currents of antipathy' (1973:44). According to Nash, Burke's ideas about the sublime – that the horror

and terror associated with nature, stem from exaltation and delight – and the following embrace of the wild, the remote and the mysterious in Romanticism, are the forerunners of America's appreciation of its wilderness (1973:45). Gradually, American attitudes began to follow the example of Romanticism, embracing wilderness rather than viewing it as an object of conquest, a material resource or an obstacle to surmount. However, while Romanticism created the conditions for wilderness appreciation, its forms of expression were also adopted for boastful nationalistic purposes and for the justification of manifest destiny. As Nash explains:

The nation's short history, weak traditions, and minor literary and artistic achievements seemed negligible compared to those of Europe. But in at least one respect Americans sensed their country was different: wilderness had no counterpart in the old world. Seizing on this distinction and adding to it deistic and Romantic assumptions about the value of wild country, nationalists argued that far from being a liability, wilderness was actually an American asset [...] a cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem (1973:67).

The picturesque mode, derived from Romanticism and lower orders of the sublime, combined with Christian design arguments to construct a politically, geographically and theologically coherent view of the West; as Andrew Jackson claimed, 'America looks American, and its appearance lets us infer God's designs for its settlement by Americans' (Fresonke, 2003:66). The popular obsession with Romantic nature, whether in Jeffersonian political rhetoric, the Hudson River School of landscape painting, or the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, does not necessarily indicate a popular concern with American Authenticity. This mainstream preoccupation with nature is either straightforwardly propagandist, or uncritically reverential; for the most part, the preoccupation with nature was not oppositional, 'bound up with a radical rejection of things are they are' to recall Berman's phrase, nor did it speak to ideas about the self or carry American Authenticity's distinctive affective tenor of nostalgia and melancholy.²⁷ As W. J. T. Mitchell argues the very idea of landscape American artists inherited from Europe is 'intimately bound up with the discourses of imperialism' (2002:9).

America's embrace of Romantic wilderness might have been ideologically predicated, a useful device in boasts of exceptionalism, in incitements to economic expansion, in justifications of violence, and in the consolidation of a national identity, but it is out of this patriotic noise that American Authenticity

grew as a more thoroughgoing, intensive and oppositional cultural concept. Yet, in its antipathy to the old world, anxiety about the encroachments of urban modernity, and embrace of Romantic aesthetics, American Authenticity both grew out of, and maintained, many of the characteristics of these mainstream cultural currents.

As I suggested at the beginning of this section, it is within the intellectual movement of American Transcendentalism most influentially in the works of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson that American Authenticity emerges from mainstream thought into a distinctively modern cultural concept. The transcendentalists, although sharing a general antipathy with European culture and ideas of American exceptionalism derived from landscape, ran counter to mainstream ideologies of manifest destiny and expansionism. In transforming commonly held Romantic attitudes toward nature into a philosophy of reclaiming a sense of self from the forces of modernization, in turning the Christian design arguments that fuelled manifest destiny into non-theological spiritual ideas about correspondence and essence, in subverting mainstream American individualism into radicalism and dissent, and in understanding the West as an epistemological asset, as much as a geographical one, Emerson and Thoreau in particular are the architects of American Authenticity.

The achievements of the transcendentalists lie in their deep thought about nature – often inspired by or implicitly referring to the West – and its relation to the self and metaphysics, in tandem with critical reflection upon the state of American society. However their championing of nature and individuality in opposition to the modern United States did not arise in a cultural vacuum; there are striking similarities between transcendentalist writing and Rousseau (Myerson, 2000:xxx). Between Rousseau and Thoreau especially, Mark J. Tremmer has argued, there exists an ‘existential likeness’, an affinity of ideas, life and work between two determined individualists, linked by ‘a strong ideological current’ which runs from Geneva to Concord via Kant and the German Idealists (1961:112).²⁸ As America began to experience the same acceleration and intensification of modernization which inspired Rousseau, the transcendentalists – consciously or not – picked up upon essentially Rousseauian themes and reconfigured them to suit American places and American problems. If Rousseau’s ideas about the state of nature representing a potential solution to the erosion of the self in modern capitalism resonate strongly in Thoreau, especially in *Walden* (1854), he shares

with Emerson a strong historical self-consciousness. Joel Porte observes that ‘nothing was more crucial to Emerson’s development than his realisation that his generation, his ‘culture renewing moment,’ constituted a new and distinct age, prompting questions about the value of the individual at this crucial crossroads in American history (2004:59).

Authenticity in transcendentalist thought arose out of disaffection with official narratives of ‘progress’ which trammelled the wilderness and indigenous peoples, with the celebrated modern technologies which allowed the United States to spread across the continent, and with the impingements on individual freedom caused by insistent calls to economic growth, competition and conquest. According to Nash, ‘mid-century American life had acquired a bustling tempo and materialistic tone that left Thoreau and his contemporaries vaguely disturbed and insecure [...] the idea that a technological civilization and the pursuit of progress were disrupting older, better patterns of living could not be entirely set aside’ (1973:86). Thoreau’s experiment in simplifying life, returning to nature and refusing all of the so-called benefits of modern civilization in *Walden* could not be further from popular nationalistic forms of nature worship in nineteenth century culture; it must be understood as a statement of profound discontent with modern American life, particularly with the aggressive juggernaut of industrial growth and technological progress: ‘We do not ride the railroad; it rides upon us,’ he lamented (2004:177). Thoreau’s relationship with nature, in writing and in life, has been interpreted as an attempt to recover for a time ‘the feel of pristine simplicity associated with pre-Columbian America’ and ‘to move beyond the Romantic pastoral or the Jeffersonian federalist myths about an Arcadian America, towards a utopian simplicity’ (Buell, 1995:178). Thoreau’s innovation in terms of American Authenticity lies in his nostalgic utopianism, in his realisation of America’s fallen condition; to speak of wilderness favourably is to recognise its irrevocable destruction, to criticise the alienating effects of technological modernity confirms the inevitability of its triumph, and attempts to reclaim the past grasp at an impossibility.

Like Rousseau however, Thoreau was no mere primitivist. Walden pond was hardly the epitome of untamed wilderness and despite being at the leading edge of anti-modern and environmentalist thought, Thoreau admitted an ambivalence towards civilization, taking some comfort from the presence of the railroad, and expressing a fear of more inhospitable natural

environments (Buell, 1995:174). Rather than advocating a retreat from society altogether, Thoreau suggested that a life lived closer to nature had the potential to enlarge a person's sense of being by offering a glimpse of a higher reality, of the spiritual world running parallel to the physical (Nash, 1973:85). Contemplation of nature, the transcendentalists proposed, had the potential to restore a sense of wholeness by healing the divide between the metaphysical and the actual that history had generated. As Carlos Rowe puts it, 'the corruption of the white colonists and the indiscriminate progress of the modern age compel Thoreau to substitute a spiritual frontier for the vanishing physical wilderness' (1987:154).

Though Emerson as a more public spirited intellectual disapproved of Thoreau's hermetic tendencies and his retreat from society (even if, like Rousseau, his point was more about balance than retreat), he shares an infatuation with nature inspired by ideas of 'the far-west,' not only for its aesthetics ('such is the constitution of things, or such is the plastic power of the human eye that the primary forms, as the sky, the mountain, the tree or the animal, give us delight in and for themselves,' Emerson writes in *Nature*), but with nature's ability to rejuvenate and inspire uniquely American thought. In Thoreau and Emerson's work, Nash argues, wilderness symbolised 'the unexplored qualities and untapped capacities of every individual,' and that 'physical wilderness was highly conducive to an inward journey,' stripping life down to its essentials and providing the necessary freedom and solitude (1973:89). In 'The American Scholar,' Emerson called for young minds to free themselves from European models and devote themselves to a life of the mind partly through spending time immersed in nature (Sattelmeyer, 1995:27). He hoped that his metaphysical conception of nature, in combination with immersion in nature itself, might help constitute a new morality and a form of resistance to the debased design arguments of the Jacksonian era in which individuals act as agents, blindly enacting the destiny of the nation (Fresonke, 2003:96). With the decline of the physical wilderness, so too the intellectual and spiritual possibilities of the American mind are impoverished; by recognising this disparity between the progress and growth of the nation and the possibilities for authentic lives within it, the transcendentalists initiated a split between America and the United States which becomes a hallmark of American Authenticity.

Connected to Thoreau's ideas about the self-enhancing possibilities of the endangered national wilderness, and anticipating another important theme in the development of American Authenticity, is his understanding of Native American cultures, specifically the Penobscot Indians, whom he met on exploratory trips to the Maine Woods (Gura, 1987:64). In a remarkable gesture against mainstream currents of racism and indifference, Thoreau found in the 'indigenous man of America' a model of representativeness and natural vigour, praising their 'liberal and enlarged view of things' and their 'mountain prospect' which allowed them to live in a cosmically symbiotic relationship with nature (Gura, 1987:65). Thoreau admired the ability of native cultures to read the poetry and mythology of their environment, lending their lives the stability and meaning of their ancestors; he saw in the aboriginal mind the transparency of vision and a wholeness most lacking in decadent nineteenth century culture (Gura, 1987:75). In this sense Thoreau only nuances through actual contact older European ideas about the 'noble savage' as an admirable anachronism bound for extinction, functioning primarily as a device for criticism, satire and imaginary escape from civilization (Sayre, 1997:8). Having initially idealised the native man as a part of nature and a morally superior representative American, Thoreau came to take the position that the ideal man lived between wildness and refinement, and following Rousseau in positing a mythic balance between wilderness and civilization (Nash, 1973:92). Nonetheless, even if Thoreau's ideas about natives adhere to European noble savage traditions, functioning as a vessel for anxieties about American modernity, they anticipate the importance of Native Americans to notions of American Authenticity, especially within the western.

A final important feature of transcendentalist thought which anticipates the character of American Authenticity, and which finds particular expression within the western, is a marked ambivalence towards political and social commitment. Generally it is accepted that the transcendentalists shared a strong sense of social commitment on the whole (Myerson:xxxix). Emerson in particular is noted for his criticism of an America capable of invading Mexico, oppressing blacks and denying women equal rights (Porte, 2004:68), while Thoreau went as far as declaring war on the state in opposition to the Mexican War and the persistence of slavery in *Civil Disobedience*. In *Walden* Thoreau expressed the political sincerity of his project with the famous phrase 'the mass of

men lead lives of quiet desperation,’ and his intention to ‘wake his neighbours up’ while his critiques of consumerism and factory production carry unknowingly Marxist overtones (2004:117, 177). Yet there is no denying that no matter how acutely the transcendentalists criticised the state of nineteenth century American society, the solutions they proposed were not only less than revolutionary; in their preoccupation with nature and recovering older ways of living, it is retreat from society and the pursuit of personal totality that defines transcendentalist politics. Buell concludes that although Thoreau meant to provoke social reflection and the conversion of Romantic fantasies into an actual lifestyle, he could stand accused of a retreat into primitivism and quietism, despite his initial diatribes against consumerism and capitalism (1995:185). Phillip Abbot goes further suggesting that ‘while Thoreau is driven on occasion to attack and even critique American society, his major preoccupations are solipsistic’ (1985:183). Abbot concludes that while Thoreau asks Rousseauian questions about the origins of inequality and makes Marxist observations about the relentless and sapping work of the common man, his solution is ‘one single act of motion, a flight from society to a state of nature,’ and therefore ‘despite Thoreau’s critique of trade, despite his attack on materialism, despite his disdain for organised religion, he offers in *Walden* advice to the middle class that is not only full of hope but is relatively painless’ (1985:194). Fresonke too is forced to conclude that Thoreau’s form of political dissent is inevitably conservative and nostalgic, that he ‘countermanded the radicalism of his own rugged individualism by focussing heavily on the redemptive, and surely retrograde, sanctuary offered in nature’ (2003:139). It is this ambivalent quality of American radical individualism, the tension between social commitment and inwardness, the perceptive critique of modern society tempered by a propensity for retreat into nature, and the lure of reforming individual consciousness over the prohibitively vast task of reforming society, which not only distinguishes American Authenticity from Marxist totality, but which also sets the affective tenor of the concept as it journeys through American culture.

Returning to the tension between the extracts from D. H. Lawrence and Thoreau, between the sense that ‘the most unfree souls go West’ and ‘westward I go free,’ when one considers the creeping nostalgia and realisation of the inevitability of modernization in Thoreau, it becomes apparent they are no longer in tension; instead they point towards a definition of the concept. Authenticity is an ideal of

the whole and unified self, derived from nature, which in American culture becomes bound up with ideas about the West. However, as a concept it is as revealing about contemporary, usually urban, anxieties and dilemmas as it is about the West itself. Almost by definition authenticity is created as an effect of a sense of loss or a realisation of inauthenticity. As such, during periods of intense modernization the concept emerges most forcefully as a backward-looking and oppositional individual totality. Put simply, anxieties about modernization foster the desire to invest intellectually or artistically in a West of the past as a solution to modern dilemmas and fears such as mechanization or the fragmentation of the self. Thoreau emerges in the mid-nineteenth century as a prescient voice, already rattling the chains in warning, even as he holds on to the ideal. By allowing a panorama to trigger the feeling of the always-already lost that is the authenticity of wildness, Thoreau unknowingly anticipated the relentless drive towards preservation and containment in opposition to the modern world that culminated in the cinema, and initiated a decisive break between the West of historical actuality and the West of the imagination. If 'Wildness is the preservation of the world,' then the cinema, with its then unquestioned indexicality – its capacity to objectively rescue space and movement from the corruption of time – became the logical medium through which to pursue Thoreau's sense of authenticity.

In 1915, in an essay titled 'America's Coming of Age' the literary critic Van Wyck Brooks realised that with the end of the transcendentalist period in American thought and letters, 'something in the American mind really came to an end' (1958:20). It was inevitable perhaps that Thoreau in particular, who went largely unappreciated in his time, would grow in influence and stature as his warnings about American modernity seemed all the more prescient, his solutions all the more tantalisingly unobtainable. As Brooks observed, 'the immense vague cloud-canopy of idealism which hung over the American people during the nineteenth century was never permitted, in fact, to interfere with the practical conduct of life' (1958:23). Despite appearing somewhat detached from the realities of nineteenth century American life, transcendentalism did in fact have a practical effect on urban planning and wilderness preservation: Emerson and Thoreau's subtle intellectual appreciation of nature influenced the more practically-minded nature writer John Muir who was instrumental in the establishment of National Parks.²⁹ David Nicholson-Lord argues that the nature worship of Thoreau

and Emerson found its ‘expression in public policy’ in particular with ‘the preservation of Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks and the spread of the City Beautiful Movement’ (1987:33). The key figure in the City Beautiful Movement, Frederick Law Olmstead (who served as a landscape architect for the Columbian Exposition) was profoundly influenced by Emerson and the ‘triumph of romanticism in American writing’ (Wilson, 1989:15), while Ebenezer Howard’s concept of low-density Garden Cities similarly drew upon transcendentalist thought (Ward, 2002:34). However, the influence of transcendentalism on American culture is more extensive and has endured beyond transcendentalism’s limited impact on public policy. Indeed, transcendentalist thought has continually re-emerged, percolating during moments of crisis or anxiety as a cultural preoccupation with authenticity and inauthenticity focused on the self and its relation to the natural world. I began this chapter with a description of one such moment, arguing that the Columbian Exposition saw the popularisation of oppositional notions of an authentically American life associated with the frontier at the precise point at which such notions were deemed obsolete in any practical sense. The following chapter will focus on the next major crisis of authenticity, exploring the reinvigoration of radical individualism and transcendentalist thought in the tumultuous social changes of the 1960s, and the western boom of the Hollywood Renaissance.



Fig. 1: The quiet desperation of modern day Shinbone. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962)



Fig. 2: “Could be the same one...” *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962)



Fig. 3: Morally and spatially simplistic duel... *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962)



Fig. 4: ...before the unsettling revelation of off-screen space. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962)

Chapter Two:

A Man Went Looking For Authenticity. And Couldn't Find It Anywhere...

Even the loveliest dream bears like a blemish its difference from reality, the awareness that what it grants is mere illusion – Theodor Adorno (2005:111)

The most important American of our time is John Wayne. Granted that all good things come from California, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan are only camp followers of Wayne, supporting players in the biggest western of them all, wagons hitched to Wayne's star – Eric Bentley, 1971 (1987:139).

Gunfight at Paramount Lot

In late 1968, on the set of *True Grit* (1969), a traditional studio production directed by Henry Hathaway, a showdown between two westerners occurred off-camera, which despite being of little consequence and likely exaggerated in retelling, has become a minor article of Hollywood lore for its embodiment of a timely clash of generations and ideologies. John Wayne, Hollywood's veteran arch-conservative, having recently co-directed and starred in the jingoistic anti-communist Vietnam war film *The Green Berets* (1968), allegedly squared off against Dennis Hopper, the young actor-director poised to become a countercultural icon with the release of *Easy Rider* (1969) (The pair had worked together before, on Hathaway's *The Sons of Katie Elder* (1965), in which John Elder (Wayne) stood over the betrayed and dying Dave Hastings (Hopper), the spineless son of a murderous gunsmith). Hopper was Wayne's own in-house communist, representing the pointlessly rebellious and anti-American leftism he saw spreading among the nation's youth. As Wayne complained to *Playboy* magazine in a controversial 1971 interview: "Mine's a rebellion against the monotony of life, against the status quo. The rebellion in these kids – especially the SDSers and those groups – seems to be a kind of dissention by rote."³⁰ Wayne allegedly treated Hopper with a curiously friendly disdain,

inviting him for drinks on his navy minesweeper, while regarding Hopper's *Easy Rider* as one of those "perverted films" he hoped America would tire of soon. He would blame Hopper, as the nearest long-haired hippie, for any anti-war action. A typical account of their 'showdown' has Wayne, enraged at hearing about the latest protest, flying onto the set of *True Grit* on the Paramount lot, demanding to know where "that pinko Hopper was hiding." Hopper recalls hiding in co-star Glen Campbell's trailer, as Wayne swaggered across the lot with a loaded .45 pistol at his side, screaming, "That goddamn Eldridge Cleaver's [interchangeable with another black radical, Stokely Carmichael, in some retellings] out there at UCLA saying 'shit' and 'cocksucker' in front of my sweet daughters. I want that red motherfucker! Where's that commie? I want to blow his brains out!"³¹ Hopper frequently recounted the incident in interviews and it featured in several of his obituaries, emblematising the colourful life of a Hollywood rebel and his fractious relationship with establishment values. It is, however, tellingly absent from Wayne's biography. Whatever the truth of this probably exaggerated 'showdown,' as a metaphor it offers a starting point for understanding the conflict and intersection of values, generations and ideologies dressed up in western costume and spiralling around notions of authenticity in the 1960s.

At the height of the tempest of cultural and social upheaval that was late sixties America, the western genre became arguably the foremost way in which Hollywood filmmakers expressed their fears and hopes at this pivotal moment in history, interrogating the nation's past with renewed vigour and clarity. The cultural spectre of American Authenticity loomed large over the era, with young radicals demanding a politics of authenticity for all races and classes, with youth culture seeking new authentic experiences, with the new embrace of nature and rejection of materialistic consumer culture, and with the pervasive questioning of the American Dream. The conjuncture of the late sixties tends to be described through its imminences and preoccupation with the new: a new generation, youth culture, New Hollywood, impending revolution or inevitable apocalypse. Yet the era is simultaneously marked by a reinvigoration of longstanding cultural currents, by nostalgia, and by imagining older ways of life as solutions to new forms of alienation. This chapter will explore how the western, straddling these progressive and backward-looking impulses, once again attempted to

reinvent and excavate the meaning of the authentic in American culture, and in the process became highly contested ideological terrain.

True Grit marks the point at which Wayne, in performance and public image, became a self-conscious anachronism. The relative consistency of his star persona over nearly four decades of westerns and the close association of this singular evolving character with a set of nineteenth century values (ruggedly individualistic, patriarchal, patriotic, and so forth) – values which Wayne in no sense created or directly experienced, merely interpreted and performed – allowed him to become a metonym for the western itself. What other actor could have a character's backstory illustrated by an assortment of clips from their career, without sacrificing the integrity of that character, as Don Siegel demonstrated in Wayne's final film *The Shootist* (1976)? His image, gait, and even tone of voice had garnered enough associations to summon a complex set of values and politics connected to an interpretation of American history increasingly at odds with contemporary post-imperial and anti-establishment culture. As Slotkin puts it, 'Wayne would be so identified with the West that his presence in a western was taken as a guarantee of authenticity, similar to which "original participants" had provided for Wild West shows and early movies' (1992:513).

That Wayne had figuratively inherited Buffalo Bill's role as the guardian of an endangered Western authenticity is particularly evident in *Big Jake* (1971), produced by Wayne's company Batjac, set in 1909, in which an aged Wayne bitterly resents the townspeople for "hanging up their spurs," demanding the respect of his arrogant sons and proving the superiority of the horse to the rapidly encroaching automobile, and defiantly boasting, "I haven't changed, not one bit." The opening credit sequence features a slide show of photographs with an old fashioned newsreel voiceover juxtaposing early twentieth century life in European and East Coast American cities to the rough uncivilized West where, "they didn't think about style, just living." The montage concludes with a clip from *The Great Train Robbery*, the narrator intoning, "while that make believe drama was on the movie screens, nine men crossed the Rio Bravo into Texas," over a cut to the first sepia toned, vignettised shot of the film, which slowly expands to fill the screen, implying the film's ontological parity with these turn-of-the-century artefacts. As an embattled appeal to the authenticity of the old

west and the authenticity of the western, it is akin to Buffalo Bill's claim to the reality of the Wild West inside the arena at the border of the White City.

Rooster Cogburn in *True Grit* represents what Garry Wills has described as Wayne's recognition of his own obsolescence, of his becoming a 'living anachronism' (1998:287). However, this transition was less an acceptance of mortality or a final flourish before abdicating the role of American hero to the younger generation (this would come later in *The Shootist*), than a pragmatic means to maintain relevance through, not in spite of, his increasingly backward values and aged appearance. Some chips appeared in Wayne's moral certitude – Cogburn is coarse, racist, casually violent, and a flagrant alcoholic, albeit in a broadly comic bumbling manner – but the film reaffirms his old fashioned heroism, as the courage of the young Mattie Ross's pursuit of violent revenge for her father's murder revives the jaded marshal. The film ends not with the novel's depressing epilogue³² of Mattie as a one-armed spinster exhuming Cogburn's corpse and learning of his later life as an attraction in a county Wild West show, but defiantly with Cogburn bidding Mattie farewell and proving his, and by extension 'The Duke's,' enduring power by leaping over a wooden fence on his horse (with the help of a swift cut to mask the stunt double).

Richard T. Jameson, writing about the persistent presence of directors, writers and stars associated with the classical studio era in the New Hollywood commonly defined only by up-and-coming iconoclasts, states that *True Grit* is like a 'film of the thirties or forties that had no trouble winning popularity at the end of the sixties' (2004:162). Grossing \$31 million, just a few places behind youth oriented zeitgeist films like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Midnight Cowboy* and *Easy Rider* in the box office totals for 1969, the success of *True Grit* – alongside musicals like *Paint Your Wagon* and *Hello, Dolly* – demonstrates the importance of a 'silent majority' favouring traditional Hollywood genres and stars, even at the peak of New Hollywood. The Academy Awards in 1970 highlighted this generational and ideological divide in Hollywood, with Wayne's cartoonish Rooster Cogburn beating the Method intensity of Dustin Hoffman to win his first Oscar, while *Midnight Cowboy* became the first X-rated film to win best picture. In August that year, Richard Nixon cited his admiration for another late Wayne vehicle, *Chisum*, in which he plays a landowner

reasserting order in a lawless New Mexico town, going on to express concerns about the young glorifying criminals in the absence of positive role models like John Wayne (Hoberman, 2003:288).

However, the generational and ideological divide that marked the 1970 Academy Awards is not played out so straightforwardly on film. In *True Grit* Hopper and Wayne appear together in a tense and gruesome scene, so morally confused and unsympathetic in its depiction of suffering and death as to complicate the expected dichotomy between Wayne (Nixon's positive role model and patriot) and Hopper (the dangerous and deluded nihilist) in this supposedly assertively traditional western. Richard T. Jameson even suggests that the scene is 'more terrible than anything in *The Wild Bunch*, though few troubled to remark it at the time' (2004:162). Even the most self-consciously traditional of westerns had perhaps unconsciously adapted to changing social mores, the slackening of institutional censorship and the muddying of moral and ideological certainty in the genre. In the scene in question Cogburn, Mattie Ross and the Texas Ranger La Beouf stumble across two horse thieves at a cabin they assumed empty. Hopper plays a misled and naïve young outlaw named Moon (suitably hippie-ish) with long hair tied in a loose ponytail. After being shot in the thigh and smoked out of the cabin, Moon is handcuffed to his nervy and aggressive partner Quincy as Cogburn grills the pair for the whereabouts of the Pepper gang. The scene is staged with Moon and Quincy seated on a bench on one side of the table, with Rooster on the other side, nonchalantly wielding his rifle with one leg propped up on the bench (Fig. 5). The shot/reverse shot cutting from one side to the other emphasises Wayne's imposing stature as Hopper sympathetically squirms and begins to capitulate in agony. Mattie and La Beouf's entrance alters the organisation of the scene, with all five figures in the same shot, Wayne in the background standing in the doorway (the subtlest of allusions to *The Searchers*, but not quite a reference). Tension builds as Quincy manically hacks at a turkey while threatening Moon as Cogburn drunkenly mocks his impending amputation until, in a sudden flurry of violence, Quincy slams his knife across Moon's fingers, whose face contorts in pain as turkey feathers grimly fly into the air. Cogburn quickly shoots Quincy who reels around and plunges his knife in Moon's chest in full view, the editing doing nothing to disguise the penetration of the blade. Hopper collapses to the floor, gasping and writhing, performing death in a manner far from the aseptic simplicity of the lately defunct Production Code era. Moon begs for a proper burial as Cogburn coldly explains,

“There’s nothing I can do. Your partner’s killed you and I’ve done for him,” before continuing to impassively press the dying man for information. In the following scene, the bodies are unceremoniously dumped in reeds by the riverbank, his last wishes evidently not carried out.

As in *Katie Elder*, Hopper dies in Wayne’s arms, but whereas the earlier film illustrated Wayne’s mercy and magnanimity towards a sadly manipulated youth, a position befitting Wayne’s public persona, Hopper’s death in *True Grit* is decidedly less clear cut morally and dramatically. Firstly, Moon is only vaguely associated with the villainous Tom Chaney, his crimes are limited to stealing horses, and his confession is of little use to Cogburn and company. Secondly, although Moon is killed by Quincy, Wayne is at least partly responsible, having deliberately set out to rile the pair, intimidating Moon and arming Quincy. And lastly, Cogburn does nothing to comfort the dying man and disregards his final wishes. There is little to justify this torturous and protracted death of a minor character. The scene serves to elicit sympathy for a tragic young outlaw, to reinforce the film’s representation of a morally compromised version of the Wayne persona, and to further the impression of a chaotic and grimly violent world that the film contrives to redeem only at its very conclusion.

In an essay titled ‘The Political Theatre of John Wayne’ published in *The Nation* in 1971 the playwright Eric Bentley declared Wayne ‘the most important American of our time,’ reading Wayne as a powerful icon of anti-communism, and hoping that ‘if John Wayne can labour so manfully to prolong a certain social order, others in his profession can labour, instead, to replace it’ (1987:143). That Bentley would think it necessary to convince left-leaning readers of *The Nation* that Wayne was no mere benign relic of the fifties, but rather a figure of growing political influence, is telling about the political ambiguity of Wayne’s image on film. In public life Wayne could use his status as Hollywood’s anachronistic elder statesman to outspokenly express his disdain for the student anti-war movement, The Black Panthers, Herbert Marcuse, and *Midnight Cowboy* (to name but a few targets), and to trenchantly defend his anti-communist, McCarthyite, and socially conservative agenda. Yet beyond his most personal projects, the thinly veiled Cold War epic and ode to republicanism *The Alamo* (1960), and the nakedly propagandist *The Green Berets*, it is questionable whether Wayne’s personal politics are evident on film, and where they are, if they survive in anything like as extreme or unambiguous forms. Certainly in *True Grit*, there is little to support an

interpretation of Rooster Cogburn as a patriotic, anti-communist or establishment figure. The overriding theme of the film is politically ambiguous – the possibility rebellious individuals, however naïve or jaded, achieving justice and redemption where corrupt institutions fail – and liable to appeal across the political spectrum.

At the precise moment Wayne achieved unprecedented prominence in public life, argues Gary Wills, ‘he no longer posed a menace in the message he preached’ (1998:288). The contrast between *The Green Berets* and *True Grit* or any other late Wayne western demonstrates how the historicity of the genre effectively neutralises and obscures its ideological standing, and how despite the western being politically charged at the flashpoint of the late sixties, the appropriation of the generic capital of the western on both the Left and the Right, and the inherent political ambiguity of its longstanding values, make the genre necessarily ideologically overdetermined. ‘A desire for a simpler world,’ writes Corkin, made the ‘frontier mythos’ resonate for both the political Left and Right’ (2004:236). Whereas *The Green Berets*’s politics, values, ideological projection and relevance to contemporary issues are obvious, *True Grit* is ripe for all kinds of interpretation and appropriation. Vincent Canby wrote in *The New York Times* that, ‘the curious thing about *True Grit* is that although [Wayne] is playing a variation on the self-assured serviceman he has played so many times in the past, the character that seemed grotesque in Vietnam fits into this frontier landscape, emotionally—and perhaps politically too.’³³ In 1969 the radical activist and ‘Yippie’ Abbie Hoffman claimed that he “liked Wayne’s wholeness, his style” and even held a begrudging admiration for his politics (“well, I suppose even the cavemen felt a little admiration for the dinosaurs that were trying to gobble them up,” he suggested, in a paleontologically suspect analogy) (Roberts and Olson, 1998:5). While it is plausible that a youthful radical like Hoffman could admire the “wholeness and style” of the anti-authoritarian, rebellious, and swaggering Rooster Cogburn, that the same could be said of the ludicrous and bloated Colonel Kirby, saving the children of South Vietnam from the savage Vietcong, is inconceivable.

By 1969 John Wayne’s success depended, like Buffalo Bill, on his impending obsolescence and deep-rooted associations with a complex of genre, myth and history. That Wayne became metonymic for the western itself, representing some ideal of the authentic in American culture is

undeniable, but what exactly this image meant in relation to the wider social, political and cultural contexts of the late sixties, onto which it cast a long shadow, is considerably less clear cut than has previously been understood. The political ambiguity of Wayne's screen image needs to be explored as the result of wider contradictions and ambivalences of American ideology and ideals dating back at least as far as the frontier, but which surface dramatically in the social and cultural upheavals of the late sixties. Yet, the same political ambiguity and opaque relation to social and historical contexts can be argued for Dennis Hopper, the other half of the 'showdown' between generations and ideologies, already seeming less diametrically opposed than either party would have liked to admit. Before opening up the issue of authenticity in late sixties culture further, it is necessary to balance the equation, to review some of the ambiguities and contradictions of *Easy Rider* in order to broker a suggestive compromise and agreement of common ground between the countercultural rebel and the conservative icon.

That *Easy Rider* is a western, or at the very least that it attempts to transpose western themes and iconography onto a modern setting, depending upon this traditional generic capital even as it strives for innovation and contemporaneity, will be obvious to all but the most genre-illiterate spectators. Billy (Hopper) the paranoid hedonistic rebel and Wyatt or 'Captain America' (Peter Fonda) the easy-going hippie, test the value and possibility of western ideals of individualism, freedom from society's constraints, and contact with nature against the backdrop of a divided and violent late sixties America. The narrative reverses the trajectory of the traditional western, beginning at the end of western expansion, in Los Angeles, where the pair begin the film selling smuggled cocaine at the end of a busy runway, the soundtrack obliterated by the roar of jet engines. With no further Western frontiers to pursue, they decide to move backwards, geographically and temporally, towards the hippie nirvana of Mardi Gras in New Orleans, as Wyatt tosses his wristwatch to the ground in a gesture against the rationalisation of time in modern civilization. This sense of going back is heightened as Wyatt and Billy stumble across the abandoned remnants of a Depression-era ranch, finding a broken compass and pausing to reflect upon the long morning shadows cast by decaying rafters, a rusting automobile, and the wind blowing across the sun-scorched ground. In the following scene, Wyatt and Billy find a working ranch in which to repair their motorcycles, confirming their

return to some archaic off-map rural America. In an obvious allusion to the western, shots of a rancher hammering a horseshoe against an anvil are intercut with the pair changing the rear wheel of the motorcycle, before the horseshoe and the wheel are attached in a single shot in which, it must be said, the motorcycles look garish and cumbersome by comparison, but the point is clear: Wyatt and Billy are the cowboys of their time, their labour being the pursuit of pleasure and escape from modern civilization (Fig. 6).

However, Wyatt and Billy's journey is not motivated simply by some naïve wish to return to the values and lifestyles of a pre-modern frontier America. As the pair sit down for a meal with the middle aged rancher, his young Mexican wife and their extensive offspring – who stare wide-eyed at the bikers as if they were alien visitors – the rancher, again seeming like a figure caught in the wrong century, recalls heading out to California as a young man ("L.A.?" he asks quizzically) but never quite making it. Wyatt compliments his host, saying earnestly "well, you sure got a nice spread here" as he glances across the idyllic sun-dappled farmland, but the rancher's crude reply subtly points towards what motivates the updating and reconfiguration of the western genre in the film. Misinterpreting Wyatt's glance and remark as approval of his extensive family, he replies "sure got a lot of them – my wife's Catholic, you know" before sending her into the house for more coffee. Wyatt corrects him, insisting, "No, I mean it – you've got a nice place. It's not every man that can live off the land. You do your own thing in your own time. You should be proud." Where the rancher only sees the achievement of having a pliant, subservient young wife, Wyatt substitutes a dreamy countercultural ideal of doing one's 'own thing' and getting back to nature, ignoring the backwardness, hardship and responsibilities of rural living.

Wyatt's vague paean to the simple life in the American heartland offers a way of understanding *Easy Rider*'s attitude towards the western and to the past more generally as one of highly selective nostalgic appropriation. Concerned primarily with the celebration of the 'freewheeling spirit of freedom, motion and style' (King, 2002:17), values concentrated in the frontier in the American mind, the film attempts to exhume these vaguest and least problematic of ideals and fuse them with the contemporary milieu of hippies, recreational drug use, rock music and – just occasionally – a simmering of social discord and violence. Nowhere is this reclamation and updating

of frontier values and mythology more evident than in the many musical driving sequences for which the film is best remembered. From the forests, canyons and deserts of Southern California and Arizona, across the endless plains of Texas, through to the bayous and rivers of Louisiana, unmistakably American landscapes are treated with an array of new techniques either borrowed from American avant-garde filmmakers like Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage or Bruce Baillie or inspired by the necessities of a heavily improvised low-budget independent production.³⁴ The constantly moving camera, accelerating alongside the protagonists, rapidly panning across the landscape speeding past or fixed on the highway peeling away at the horizon, emphasises the freedom and dynamism of the open road; inviting the abstraction of lens-flare, overexposure and unfocussed zooms suggest the sensorial overload of cross-country travel and the potential for renewed vision by returning to nature; while the alternately aggressively disjunctive and smoothly flowing non-linear editing provides visual accompaniment to folk and psychedelic rock tracks of the year, like The Byrds' sparkling pastoral plea 'I Wasn't Born to Follow,' Steppenwolf's macho ode to the highway and adventure 'Born to be Wild,' or the biblical Southern soul of The Band's 'The Weight.'

Yet for all this emphasis on innovation and contemporaneity in the film's form, its aesthetic remains firmly within the American tradition of viewing landscape as near-sublime spectacle, offering escape and self-discovery; the scenery might appear blighted by highways or pock-marked by the signs of global corporations, its visual style inflected with some of the experimental energies of the hippie counterculture, but the implied value of individualistic masculine retreat into romantic nature remains essentially unaltered and undiminished in *Easy Rider*. Indeed the film even has Wyatt and Billy ride through 'John Ford Country,' past the iconic mesas of Monument Valley silhouetted in a dusky pink light, in a scene that is nothing short of reverential, both to the spectacle of the landscape, and to its most influential exponent. The point I wish to emphasise here, one which will be expounded throughout this chapter, is that the counterculture did not reinvent the West on film; it merely rediscovered the potential of the West as an antidote to a new set of contemporary issues and anxieties. The politics of the West as a countercultural space consist only of what is being implicitly rejected. In *Easy Rider*, the confinement of cities and the machine world (represented by the lattice of iron girders which appear to trap the riders as they enter the South), oppressive institutions of law and

order, and the intolerance of 'straight' redneck America – in short, old anxieties merely updated – form the counterpoint of the freedom, beauty and self-realisation offered by nature. As Mark Shiel argues, *Easy Rider* exemplifies the rejection of the city in favour of the country, and the focus on the rural American West as 'a countercultural heterotopic space par excellence':

Thematically and stylistically, the film exemplified the assertive countercultural conception of space of the day, rejecting inhuman modernization and rationalistic capitalism, focussing on the countryside and the wilderness, taking a phenomenological pleasure in the sheer fact of motion itself, and mapping a new human society, by means of a rejuvenated pastoral form (2007:92).

According to Shiel, this countercultural pastoral form constitutes more than an updating of traditional themes of Romantic escapism. He argues that the countercultural escapism of *Easy Rider* acknowledges the key social and political conditions of the day, carrying resonances with the popular anti-war resistance, 'the eclipse of liberal race politics of the Civil Rights era by the assertively left-leaning politics of Black Power,' and the growing scepticism of the American youth towards 'the spiritual emptiness and moral corruption of consumer capitalism and conventional party politics' (2007:93). The explosive and senseless deaths of the protagonists at the hands of intolerant rednecks, Shiel suggests, echo the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy and crystallized the 'intense disgust and defiance of the counterculture with the social, political, and moral status quo of the day' (2007:93).

However, if *Easy Rider* does acknowledge contemporary social and political issues, it does so only through vague implication, and by association with the film's soundtrack and representation of the late sixties hippie milieu. The film's disaffected tone and rejection of contemporary America are unmistakable, but its attitude toward specific issues of the day, or any clear sense of the factors motivating the disillusioned retreat into wilderness, are harder to ascertain. Due to the film's rediscovery of traditional ideas about romantic individualistic retreat in the West and its refusal to explicitly acknowledge the aspects of contemporary life being rejected, *Easy Rider* can very easily be interpreted as ideologically ambiguous, if not altogether apolitical. Moreover, it is the film's rediscovery of American Authenticity – in a slightly more oppositional, disaffected, but essentially

unaltered form – a concept which, as Chapter One began to demonstrate, is defined in part by its ambivalence towards social commitment and by its propensity for solipsistic retreat, that engenders the wider ideological ambiguity of *Easy Rider*. Fittingly, Thomas Elsaesser remarks that although *Easy Rider*, like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) before it, functions as a rare popular and successful alternative to affirmative narratives, with its fashionable air of resigned melancholy, loose structure and relatively ‘unmotivated’ protagonists, thematically the film ‘revives the ever-present Huck Finn motif in American culture, about the male couple ganging up to escape civilization and women’ (2004:286). Opting for a kind of ‘realism of sentiment’ which may have chimed with contemporary youth audiences, but which tends to lapse into self-pity, Elsaesser continues, *Easy Rider* – as a representative example of the ‘new American cinema’ – is at its weakest when viewed in ideological terms, as it is concerned ‘neither with cause nor with historical circumstances’ and thus mystifies both the heroes and ‘the world that dooms them’ (2004:287). Whereas Elsaesser views the film’s ideological weakness as a corollary of the narrative strategy of the ‘unmotivated hero,’ Ryan and Kellner go further, arguing that it is in *Easy Rider* ‘that the ambivalent ideology of sixties individualism is most evident’:

Such individualism is usually male and highly narcissistic. Consequently, the ride into nature which the bikers undertake is both a metaphor for the escape from urban oppression into the freedom of self-discovery and a synecdoche for male narcissistic regression to a warm, comforting maternal environment in the face of the constraints of modern mass life [...]. Moreover, although the hippie quest permits a critique of small town southern provincialism, it is also essentially aimed toward an ideal of freedom that is highly traditional. Indeed, it recalls the Jeffersonian yeoman ideal of small rural capitalism [...] In a certain sense the bikers’ ride is a much into the past as it is into the heartland (1988:23-4).

That *Easy Rider* evokes an ideal of freedom that is highly traditional, making it representative of the ambivalent ideology of the hippie counterculture as a whole is a vital point, but one that should not be overstated. The film does not unequivocally endorse the nostalgic retreat of its protagonists: the darker side of the hippie lifestyle is suggested by Billy’s aggressive paranoia; the distinctly ironic treatment of the commune mocks its mysticism and self-conscious regression to pre-modern ways of

living; and one of the more obvious readings of Wyatt's famously ambiguous concluding line "we blew it" is as a realisation of the futility of self-indulgent quests into the American past as a solution to contemporary alienation.

Whichever way the delicately balanced ambivalence of late sixties individualism is tipped in *Easy Rider*, towards traditional ideals of freedom or its attempts to 'map a new human society,' it is clear the film is not at all radical in a left political sense. Very traditional ideas of American individualism and freedom derived from contact with nature merely acquire the hippie accent of doing one's 'own thing' and this freedom is fuelled – very literally, stuffed into the fuel-tanks – by money, which however illicitly acquired suggests some endorsement of the liberty achieved in pursuit of the dollar. And while Wyatt and Billy became icons of anti-establishment rebellion, it is worth noting that their crimes onscreen are limited to smoking pot, dropping acid and light-heartedly mocking a small town parade – hardly the activities of dangerous radicals or outlaws, especially in 1969, the year of the advent of the Weathermen and The Days of Rage.³⁵

Neither could the pair be accused of being unpatriotic. Indeed the film as a whole appears almost obsessively preoccupied with the idea of America, from the stars and stripes painted on Captain America's motorcycle and embroidered on his jacket, to the flags that line the streets of small towns (one poignantly upside-down), to George Hanson's (Jack Nicholson) exasperated observations about the state of the nation ("this used to be a helluva country. I can't understand what's gone wrong with it"), to the film's Simon and Garfunkel paraphrasing tagline about disillusionment: "a man went looking for America and couldn't find it anywhere..." This appropriation of national symbolism might be motivated by disaffection with the historical and social reality of the United States, a gesture of alienation from the American Dream, but not a total rejection; the stars and stripes are not burned. The tendency for the films of the Hollywood Renaissance to invest in a higher transcendent ideal of America while rejecting the present condition of the nation will be explored in greater depth in due course, suffice to point out for now that *Easy Rider* is as dedicated to an ideal of America as it is to attendant notions of freedom and individualism, however betrayed, threatened or lapsed this ideal is discovered to be.

Returning to the ‘showdown’ on the set of *True Grit*, it is clear that the metaphor reveals less about any substantive ideological divide, and more about a mutual frustration about the loss of a shared set of ideals, about a notion of American Authenticity that however divergent shares the same roots, and about the inability of either party to locate a convincing or curable source of this malaise. Despite John Wayne’s distaste for *Easy Rider* – probably based on nothing more than a general intolerance towards the protagonists’ moral laxity rather than any ideological reasons³⁶ – one could easily imagine him uttering a similar sentiment to George Hanson’s perplexed lament that “this used to be a helluva country.” What separates the political poles of the Hollywood Renaissance, if we are to maintain such a separation, is less the idea that something had gone seriously wrong with the nation (this tends to be a point both the left and right agree on, not least in 1969), and not the constitution of American Authenticity – a notion broad and flexible enough to be a consensual ideal – but rather the nature of inauthenticity, the source of this perennial malaise being hard to locate in an especially vexed and complicated period of social and political upheaval. In short, never before had the pursuit of American Authenticity been such a popular national pastime and cultural preoccupation, and never before had the impossibility of this ideal, the inevitability of its failure, and the objectless mourning that follows, so swiftly followed the urgency of the pursuit. This chapter aims to retrace this trail of disillusionment, exploring the shifting meanings of the authentic in the sixties America and its articulation in the westerns of the Hollywood Renaissance.

Crisis of Authenticity

The years 1962-63 represent the first significant crisis of confidence for the western genre, with production falling to an unprecedented nadir.³⁷ Film production as a whole was down, as the beleaguered Hollywood studio system weathered the impact of television, the loss of vertical integration and spiralling production costs (Monaco, 2001:11). Yet even taken as a proportion, the handful of major westerns released in this period made up less than ten percent of all features produced for the first time in the sound era; a decade earlier the genre made up a third of all film production in Hollywood.³⁸ This sense of irrevocable decline is not limited to production statistics; it

forms the thematic basis and tone for the clutch of westerns released in the period, most notably *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, alongside *Ride The High Country* (Peckinpah, 1962), *Lonely Are The Brave* (Miller, 1962) and *Hud* (Ritt, 1963). These films do not simply operate within the genre, but rather demand to be understood in relation to the genre, as they comment upon a supposed decline of the West along with its values, ideals, spaces and possibilities. All four films spontaneously and acutely diagnose the malaise of inauthenticity in America, locating the ailment in a West which predominantly figures as an absence, and delivering a terminal prognosis through stark contrasts and unresolvable conflicts. As Corkin argues, these films share '[...] a distrust of the trappings of modernity and the manner in which its complex social formations easily tend towards excesses of power in the hands of faceless bureaucrats' (2004:243). Not all of these films are without ambivalence (*Liberty Valance*, as I have demonstrated, is engaged in a conflicted questioning of the object of its deeply felt mourning), but all are remarkable for distilling a simple (arguably simplistic) essence of western authenticity at odds with modern America, an essence not on the wane or threatened, as it might have been conceived in the previous decade, but teetering on the brink of extinction or lost entirely.

The passing of American Authenticity is expressed in these films primarily by relocating the genre to the twentieth century, generating a sense of what Robert B. Ray describes as the 'lateness' of the Left westerns of the sixties, emphasising confinement and demonstrating 'the anachronous quality of certain lifestyles' (1985:306). As if the fictional West had aged in parallel with the Hollywood western, by 1962 the genre increasingly eschewed traditional mid-to-late nineteenth century settings – in which western values could be shown to exist relatively unproblematically – in favour of dialectical early twentieth century modernity, post-World War Two, or contemporary society: settings designed to generate conflicts and contrasts between the westerner irreconcilable with an inauthentic present. Thus, *Ride the High Country* begins, like *Liberty Valance*, with an ageing westerner, Steve Judd (Joel McCrea), slightly bewildered and pathetic in a world of bustling crowds, automobiles, and cops patrolling the streets. Judd 'clings desperately and absurdly to his past' with an embattled pride and righteousness that makes him appear like a rigid caricature (Kitses, 2004:208). His former partner, Gil Westrum (Randolph Scott) on the other hand, has adapted to the new world, but sacrificed his

integrity and dignity in the process, becoming the self-styled ‘Oregon Kid’, a huckster at a sideshow. Edward Buscombe, in his influential 1970 article on American genres, suggests that Peckinpah works both within and against the western form, to describe ‘men who have outlived their time’ and unable to adapt to the modern world, ‘all that remains to them is a bitter and tragic heroism’ (2003:24-5). The pair are compromised, but complementary and representative of a larger decline: as Kitses puts it both are ‘masks for the same face, expressions of the same spirit, the spirit of the American West’ (2004:210). The reconciliation of these two faces is achieved only temporarily, in the final showdown against the animalistic Hammond brothers, before Judd is fatally wounded. In the concluding shot of the film, Judd takes in a final view of the autumnal Yosemite landscape, the yellow leaves and mountain backdrop providing an elegiac chorus for a passing order (Fig. 7).

This stirringly depressing forecast about the decline of western heroism, accentuated by the casting of two noticeably diminished former western stars in Joel McCrea and Randolph Scott, is borne out in *Hud*, a modern western and family drama set in post-World War Two Texas released the following year. Against a backdrop of a stark and desolate prairie, emphasised by sparse compositions and black and white – almost social realist – cinematography, the film explores the remnants of traditional western individualism on a decaying ranch quarantined after an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease (Fig. 8). The film establishes an irreconcilable conflict of generations, between the elderly and principled ranch owner Homer (Melvyn Douglas), and his son Hud (Paul Newman), the angry young man and aimless cowboy of the post-war small town, who rages pointlessly against his emasculated father (with echoes of Jim Stark in *Rebel without a Cause*), against all authority and state interference, and lives only for the pursuit of married women in local bars. When Homer dies exhausted and disenchanted with the world after falling from his horse and being forced to slaughter his prized and rare longhorn cattle (an overt symbol of threatened wildness), Hud concludes disaffectedly that “he couldn’t have made it, even if he wanted to,” and unrepentantly sells the ranch to a speculative oil company.

The film deflatedly depicts, if not the death of western individualism, then its terminal disease and collapse into ineffectual selfishness and hedonism. Crucially, the film refuses to present Hud as an admirable disaffected rebel: he abuses his young nephew Lonnie’s naïve admiration, openly plots

to legally dispossess his father of the ranch, and pursues the middle-aged housekeeper Alma with increasing sexual aggression, culminating in attempted rape. In a climactic scene Homer confronts Hud on the stairs of the farmhouse after he and Lonnie stumble home drunk, berating him for his lack of values and selfishness; his final salvo, “you live just for yourself – that makes you not fit to live with” is emblematic of the film’s wider claims about declining morality and the impossibility of absolute individualism as a basis for living in an increasingly complex society.

The figure of the romantic man-out-of-time rebel that *Hud* refuses and begins to criticise is embodied totally, even excessively, by Jack Burns (Kirk Douglas) in *Lonely are the Brave* – adapted from Edward Abbey’s 1956 novel *Brave Cowboy* – another post-World War Two western with a stark black and white aesthetic composed of contrasts between old and new. In the opening scene Burns is shown waking in the open, alongside his horse and smouldering campfire, staring in a bemused fashion at three jet contrails streaked across the morning sky. Emerging out of the wilderness, he cuts through a barbed wire fence and crosses a busy highway, the speeding cars spooking his horse. For Jack Burns, fences, borders and highways are signs of the gradual encroachment of modern civilization into the wilderness, which threatens to choke his way of life out of existence. The incongruity and impossibility of Burns’s existence in the modern world is confirmed as he escapes from a county jail, pursued by a pernicious and alien helicopter and eventually dying on a rain-slicked highway after being hit by a truck transporting a load of toilets – an absurd symbol, fatalistically foreshadowed throughout the film, of the unnatural forces which have obliterated Burns’s West. As melancholic ‘end of the West’ endings go, there are none more obvious or emphatic than the final shot of Burns’s cowboy hat discarded on the black rain-slicked tarmac (Fig. 9).

While the film mourns Burns’s death, encouraging identification and sympathy with his childlike and idealistic adherence to a world without borders or restrictions, and his unerring loyalty to his friends, the very archetypal obviousness of his characterisation – his tragic heroism, innately given – and his ultimately self-destructive inability to compromise with the modern world, produces an important ambiguity. As Neil Campbell argues in a work on the culture of the ‘New West’, *Lonely Are The Brave* is tinged with sadness at the inevitability of Burns’s death ‘within the context of the New West as a modern, technological space, while representing Burns as a fading Marlboro Man

clinging onto a dream of a time that never really existed' (2000:86). As in *Liberty Valance*, the authentic westerner is mourned, the impossibility of his continued existence telling of concerns about the manifold constrictions of life in the modern technological, or 'new' West, but his absence must also be understood as the result of his stubborn intransigence and his uncompromising commitment to an illusory ideal. In *Lonely Are The Brave*, these doubts about Burns's role as romantic man-out-of-time rebel – what one might term a tonal or attitudinal ambiguity – are articulated by his friend Gerry (Gena Rowlands), the sole female voice in the film, who warns him about the incompatibility of his values in a rapidly changing world: "out there is the real world, and it's got real fences and trouble and either you go by the rules or you lose, you lose everything...I don't understand men anymore." Campbell argues that it is men, for Gerry, 'that have perpetuated the utopianism that will eventually kill them because it fails to include responsibility to others, to family, and to community' (2000:85). It is common in westerns for women to be a source of relative pragmatism and to criticise men for their self-destructive idealism. The difference, however, is that in the western's traditional late-nineteenth century setting it is the domestic sphere which is alien, with feminine calls for restraint and compromise usually proving ineffective in resolving the conflict at hand. In the modern western by contrast, it is the domestic sphere which is shown to be rational (Gerry in *Lonely are the Brave* and Alma in *Hud* are earthy and practical, with a clearer perspective on the complexities of the modern world than the men around them), while the uncompromising individualism of the modern cowboy, his preoccupation with wilderness and resistance to any form of restraint appears increasingly deluded and simplistic. Thus, *Hud* and *Lonely are the Brave*, despite the latter being vastly more sympathetic to its protagonist's world-view, both encounter the problem of realising that something vital about American life is no longer a possibility, but from a pragmatic liberal perspective that cannot wholeheartedly endorse such dreamy nostalgic utopianism.

Taken together, *Liberty Valance*, *Ride the High Country*, *Lonely are the Brave* and *Hud* are simultaneously marked by a similar sense of belatedness by the melancholy realisation of the passing of the Old West (as environment, social space, source of identity, even genre), and all with remarkable clarity and urgency explore the problem of declining authenticity in America with varying degrees of ambivalence. Edward Gallafent has argued likewise, suggesting that *Lonely Are the Brave*

and *Hud* raise the question of an ending and ask ‘about an America in which although the process of settlement has long been concluded, it had historically been possible to become, or remain, some kind of westerner by an act of choice’; these films, he suggests ‘are part of an interrogation of whether this choice is becoming an impossible one in contemporary America’ (1996:242). The modernist moment westerns of 1962-3 appear to respond in kind that indeed, western authenticity is no longer a feasible condition, that the moment when such a choice were possible has passed, that any attempted excavation however noble or heroic is bound for failure, and that such a condition if obtainable at all, might at best be a mixed blessing.

The same question is answered, albeit conversely, in the year’s one major traditional western, *How The West Was Won* (1962), a lavish omnibus epic produced by various luminaries of the genre and shot – in contrast to the generally austere styles of the modernist moment westerns – in spectacular Cinerama widescreen. As its title suggests, the film revives the affirmative and triumphalist traditions of the late-thirties nation-founding or manifest destiny western with scant concessions to tentatively emerging historical revisionism, yet it too confronts, with unusual candour, the ending of the West and the question of whether any western authenticity persists in contemporary America. It does so primarily in its final minutes, through an unconventional epilogue which takes the form of a narrated documentary, its aesthetic derived from the widescreen ‘ride’ film such as *This Is Cinerama* (1952). In the final dramatic scene, directed by Henry Hathaway, three generations of the Rawlings family travel through Monument Valley (rendered unintentionally surreal by its surplus of vanishing points on the horizon due to the three-strip Cinerama process) singing ‘A Home in the Meadow’ a pastoral folk song about homeland which transitions into a choral non-diegetic score as the family ride towards the horizon (Fig. 10). What follows is a series of aerial shots from a speeding helicopter illustrating the changing landscape and historical development of the modern West, accompanied by a monologue, intoned with near rhapsodic earnestness by Spencer Tracey, designed to address a version of the same question confronted in *Lonely Are The Brave* and *Hud*; and to this question it gives its absolutely affirmative and unequivocal response. From a parting shot of Monument Valley, a fade to an ascending shot of the Grand Canyon and the vast artificial landscape of Lake Mead seamlessly links the Old West and the new, implying omniscient mastery over the land.

Tracey confirms authoritatively “The West won by its pioneers, settlers and adventurers is long gone now” (itself an oddly obvious comment to make at the conclusion of an historical epic) but goes on to insist upon all the continuities between this West and the modern technological region of the present day. The importance of the conquest of the West to American national identity is reaffirmed as it is maintained that “they left tracks that will never be eroded by wind or rain, never ploughed under by tractors” and more forcefully, as if to acknowledge the suggestion that the importance of western expansion to American life had been diminished in the post-war era, “never buried in the compost of events.” The narration then turns, in its own slightly simplistic and sentimental oratorical manner, to the lasting ideological legacy of the frontier, stating that the “hard simplicity” and “vitality” of frontier lives have inspired “legends of courage and pride” to be passed on to future generations. Over sweeping images of quarries, agricultural land, and mines, Tracey continues, in an unapologetic nod to manifest destiny traditions, that “from soil enriched from their blood, out of their fever to explore and build came lakes where once were burning deserts, came the good of the earth, mines and wheat fields, orchards and great lumber mills, all the seam of a growing country.” This unreserved celebration of technological and industrial progress, of the triumph of white civilization (there is perhaps a racial connotation to the line about the soil being enriched by pioneer blood, as if it were nutritionally impoverished by the presence of natives), and transformation of the environment and geography of the West, could not be further from the melancholy ecological concerns of *Lonely Are The Brave* (Fig. 11). The form of this sequence itself is a kind of technological modernism, glorifying speed, technology and industry through the innovative use of a helicopter shots. The spectacle of aerial cinematography attempts to render sublime the same man-made transformation of the landscape – not least the Hoover dam – that western writers like Edward Abbey treat as lamentable and incongruous corruptions. Nowhere in this strident epilogue is a thought permitted for anything like *Liberty Valance*’s wild desert rose, for the cost and sacrifices of unbridled progress.

Most remarkably of all, the epilogue unproblematically and seamlessly links the historical frontier to that which is normally treated with the upmost scepticism, if not outright animosity, in the western: the modern city. The narrator concludes emphatically with distinct Cold War overtones, that out of the primitive settlements and trading posts of the Old West, “came cities to rank among the

great ones of the world, all the heritage of a people free to dream, free to act, free to mould their own destiny.” Rather than envision the new West as a corrupted, decaying and inauthentic remnant of the old, as it is conceived in the other westerns of 1962-3, *How The West Was Won* insists upon an uncompromised connection between the frontier, the American dream and the sprawling metropolitan regions of the new West. As a choir hail the “Promised Land,” the film treats the urban landscape with a pictorial distance, speeding above the busy concrete highways of downtown Los Angeles, and spiralling directly above a multilevel intersection as if it were some kaleidoscopic wonder of nature (Fig. 12). Finally swooping over the crowded San Francisco hills, and passing under the looming Golden Gate Bridge, the camera banks towards the Pacific Ocean, where the continental expansion of the United States ends, in pursuit of a new American frontier, possibly those in Indochina.

There is nothing novel ideologically about the claims made by this bombastic epilogue, even if it appears quite antiquated for 1962; its significance lies in the explicitness of its expression, its utter ideological transparency, and its providing emphatic and unambiguous enunciation of what, in an earlier era, would have been merely implied or assumed to be self-evident. This obviousness is, in Adorno’s terms, the antidote to the lie of the film’s ideological certainty, and like a witness protesting too much under scrutiny, betrays an almost Turnerian anxiety about what the end of western expansionism will do to the American character. *How The West Was Won* responds to the same question about the end of the West as *Liberty Valance*, *Ride the High Country*, *Lonely Are The Brave* and *Hud*, but decides instead to assuage all doubts and answer resoundingly in the affirmative, that American values and ideology remain essentially unaltered in spite of historical development. The modernist moment westerns, on the other hand, have no interest in preserving an American character based on manifest destiny, technological progress and territorial expansion; instead, their concern with the demise of an authentic moral liberty, freedom of movement, and protection of the natural environment are conceived precisely in opposition to the continuities that *How the West was Won* celebrates.

The modernist moment westerns anticipate the demythologising and anti-imperialist revisionism and the renewed focus on the problem of authenticity that came to dominate the westerns of the Hollywood Renaissance. But they are perhaps best understood as the product of tendencies in

American culture in the preceding decade and as the result of Hollywood undergoing a significant period of industrial and generational transition. The modernist moment westerns of 1962 carry out the same exploration of declining American individualism that had emerged in sociology and literature in the early fifties, slowly seeping into mass culture as the decade progressed. The radical sociologist C. Wright Mills began his 1951 study of the rise of the salaried white collar professional in post-war America by reflecting on the disparity between the nation's cultural obsession with the frontier, and its ever depreciating relevance to life in an advanced capitalist nation:

Perhaps the most cherished national images are sentimental versions of historical types which no longer exist, if they ever did [...] America is neither the nation of horse-traders and master builders, nor the nation of claim-jumping, cattle-rustling, pioneers of frontier mythology. Nor have traits rightly or wrongly associated with such historic types carried over to the contemporary population to any noticeable degree (2002:xiii).

Mills is clearly sceptical about locating any authentic community or ideal individualism in the nineteenth century, but nonetheless decries how far the United States had moved away from frontier possibility, even as an unlikely possibility. He continues to describe an admittedly rose-tinted nineteenth century American ideal in which 'individual freedom seemed the absolute principle of social order,' a world far from authoritarianism, bureaucracy, feudal traditions or ruthless competition (2002:4-11).

Mills evokes the figure of the alienated salaried professional living in new suburbs – the kind emblematised by Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* or Sloane Wilson's titular *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* – and desperately clinging to an entirely false image; a relic from a mythologised nineteenth century long since expired, held as the true reflection of his character. David Riesman, in his study of the nation's changing economic and demographic makeup – the very title of which *The Lonely Crowd* (1952), became shorthand for an alienated middle-class – arrives at a similar conclusion. He characterises an 'inner-directed' character type, dominant in transitional societies like the U.S. in the nineteenth century, as a figure capable of pursuing a personal goal and maintaining a sense of self while withstanding the 'buffetings of his environment' (1961:16). This gyroscopic individual is supplanted and outnumbered for the first time in post-war society, according to Riesman,

by the 'other-directed' type, one 'motivated by the insatiable force of their psychological need for approval and looking to contemporaries for their source of direction in the absence of an 'inner-gyroscope'; the 'other-directed' type presents a challenge to American ideals clearly inspired by the fear of Soviet-style totalitarian instrumentalisation.

William Whyte similarly, for all his scepticism about the actuality of American nineteenth century individualism, recognised that the shift in American labour patterns in the fifties constituted a 'major shift in American ideology' (2013:4). The insistently moderate Whyte makes it plain that his study of the 'Organisation Man' is not a plea for nonconformity or nostalgic return to an agrarian past, but nonetheless concludes that the language of nineteenth century individualism and the American Dream is used only to stave off the reality, that American life is largely defined by the large corporate collective. Taken together, Mills, Riesman and Whyte suggest an emergent intellectual concern with the effect an outwardly prosperous and conformist mass society dominated for the first time by the white collar salaried professional, might have on the questionable national values represented by the frontier.³⁹ The frontier is invoked not as a concrete solution to contemporary alienation, but as a negative image, as a measure of just how far post-war society had fallen from its most treasured self-images.

The Beat movement, abstract expressionism and jazz all in their own way react against the stultifying conformity of post-war society and pursue authentic self-expression and experience in a manner that anticipates the counterculture of the 1960s. The Beats in particular youthfully reinvigorated the transcendentalist propensity in American culture, retreating from anonymous plenitude and revelling in the flow of experience, searching for illumination and the Emersonian idea that 'the self in its infinite variety is the source of all good'⁴⁰ (Gitlin, 1987:51). Whereas the Beats generally urbanised this transcendentalism, stripping its encrusted associations of the frontier and adding their own mythology of jazz, drugs, sex and freaks – anything to escape the abundant squareness of mainstream society – Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* holds onto the idea of the West, reconfiguring it as a Beat paradise of freedom and masculine adventure. By the time *On the Road* was published in novel form in 1957, its breathless expression of the Beat version of authenticity, represented by the westerner Dean Moriarty and his goal of achieving 'It', was hungrily ingested by

emerging youth culture. The allure of 'It', a 'state of being that cannot be defined concretely,' or 'a metaphorical dominion where time stops and everyday concerns fall away' (Theado, 2000:70), once again thought to reside in the expanses of the West and defined as something to fill the vacuum left by modern life, proves to be illusory. *On the Road* can be read as the 'ur-text' of the Hollywood Renaissance western as it strides out confidently and innovatively in search of a *new* authenticity in an Old West, and finds it once again, agonisingly unobtainable. Sal Paradise's first impression of the West, one which echoes through the modern westerns of the Hollywood Renaissance, is of the lame pageantry of Wild West Week in a small Colorado town, upon which he reflects: 'I was amazed, and at the same time I felt it was ridiculous: in my first shot at the West I was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition' (2000:30).

There is undoubtedly a shared structure of feeling connecting Kerouac's ill-fated yet exhilarating attempt at achieving 'It' in the American West, to the anomie of various men in grey flannel suits diagnosed by Mills and Riesman, to Cary Scott's longing for authentic Thoreauvean community in *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), and to all the melancholy, decay and nostalgic utopianism of the modernist moment westerns. Yet these are isolated pockets of dissent in an overwhelmingly affirmative culture, tending to advocate not social change, but various forms of – usually doomed – retreat from society altogether. These sporadic moments of resistance against the well-characterised blend of complacency, conformity, plenitude and contradiction that was Pax Americana, might not propose any solutions beyond a nostalgic glance towards the pre-modern, but they are nonetheless important harbingers of the mass cultural and political preoccupation with authenticity in the sixties.

America's Continuing Past

The emergence of a new American auteur cinema during the Hollywood Renaissance of 1967-77 was a remarkable aberration, permitted by a brief window of creative freedom offered to a group of individuals well positioned to tap the zeitgeist and arouse the interest of the newly important youth or 'baby boom' demographic. Film historians tend to agree that the cinema initiated by *Bonnie and*

Clyde and *The Graduate* in 1967 was first and foremost a product of a period of industrial and economic crisis and transition; constituted by as many continuities with old Hollywood as radical departures, thus why the term ‘renaissance’ is preferred to ‘new-wave.’⁴¹ Yet, it is also regarded as a period of relatively challenging cinema: aesthetically experimental, socially relevant, and ideologically and politically aware. The extent to which the Hollywood Renaissance presented a genuine challenge or alternative to the cinema it briefly succeeded can easily be overstated. As the remainder of this chapter will partly function to illustrate, even at its height, the period remained a cinema that pushed at the limits of, rather than entirely overcame, the forms and ideological content of old Hollywood: largely indebted to classical genres; its anti-establishment or anti-bourgeois tendencies having much in common with traditional American values; its stylistic experiments, ‘unmotivated heroes’ and surplus of unhappy endings, broaden the aesthetic palate but hardly altering the basic constants of Hollywood cinema as a commercial storytelling medium.⁴²

Overstating the revolution in Hollywood aesthetics and ideology in the period 1967-77 is also to risk reductive generalisations about classical Hollywood, with the studio era being cast as overwhelmingly conservative, conventional, and ideologically complicit by comparison. Undoubtedly, the simmering concern about declining authenticity that characterises much high culture in the fifties is not especially evident in mass culture like Hollywood in the same period, at least not in the same manner; put crudely, there is nothing that could meaningfully be described as Beat cinema outside of avant-garde circles. In a very general sense, Hollywood in the fifties was socially conservative, affirming dominant institutions and values, with this ideological consistency maintained by the Production Code and formal conventions that contributed to an ordered, unified and continuous representation of society.

However, one does not have to look very far for exceptions. The study of fifties Hollywood has consistently revealed a cinema of barely suppressed social critique and subversive content expressing all the contradictions and anxieties of the era and betraying a surface image of consensus and plenitude.⁴³ Genres, not least the western, far from being monolithically affirmative or straightforwardly escapist, were used as cover for all manner of historical and social criticism. Delmer Daves’ *Broken Arrow* (1950) and Anthony Mann’s *Devil’s Doorway* (1950) treated the plight of

native Americans with sympathy and contemporary racial overtones long before the revisionist Indian westerns of the Renaissance, Fritz Lang's *Rancho Notorious* (1952) deployed modernist distancing to criticise patriarchal capitalism, and Fred Zinneman's *High Noon* (1952) offered an allegory of cowardly conformity and the surrender of civil liberties in the HUAC era, to name but a few prominent examples. Andre Bazin observed at the time (not favourably) that the 'adult' western was losing what he regarded as its straightforward mythic/historical simplicity and becoming increasingly self-conscious, stylised and psychologically complex.⁴⁴ The diverse and complex political meanings of fifties westerns suggest that in order to understand the similarly variegated westerns of the Hollywood Renaissance, more nuance and subtlety is needed than the descriptors 'revisionist' or 'anti-western' imply. Such epithets if left unqualified rest upon highly questionable oppositions like classical Hollywood = ideologically affirmative / Hollywood Renaissance = ideologically aware or critical. Criticism in a sense needs to avoid the very process of reduction or exaggeration involved in the implicit idea of the western generated by revisionist westerns.⁴⁵ Ryan and Kellner argue instructively that although much Hollywood cinema is ideological, not all Hollywood films are inherently ideological in the same way, and that such a conception 'flattens out necessary distinctions between different films at different moments of history, and it overlooks the distinctive and multiple rhetorical and representational strategies and effects of films in varying social situations' (1988:1). Examining the expression of authenticity – a very specific, constantly shifting and historically conscious form of ideology – requires this kind of close attention to the relation between matters of history, form, and reception.

The foregrounding of authenticity in American culture is initiated only after the combination of era-defining events in 1962-63, including the height of cold war tensions, the surge of the civil rights movement, the assassination of President Kennedy, and the escalation of war in Vietnam. These events brought what is often characterised as the 'long fifties,' a period of relative stability and conservatism, to an abrupt end, and heralded the sixties proper as an era defined conversely by accelerating change and the breakup of consensus. Historian Godfrey Hodgson wrote in 1976 that the early years of the sixties constituted nothing less than 'a real break in the continuity of American experience' (2005:14). He argues that this break was not so much the effect of an accumulation of

problems, but a crisis ‘in the mind and spirit of the country’, in which ‘for the first time since the Civil War and reconstruction, a generation of Americans were compelled to ask not, as people had asked in the Depression, how to solve their problems, but whether their problems could be solved’ (2005:15). For the first time since the Civil War Americans wondered where it all went wrong, looking beyond the issue at hand and questioning the meaning of America itself, and whether its fundamental principles were still being protected; a crisis not so much of practical politics but of self-understanding and political philosophy. The same self-consciousness about the American nation being a kind of experiment that famously runs through Lincoln’s ‘Gettysburg Address’ or Alexis de Tocqueville’s mid-nineteenth century study *Democracy in America*, is revived in the early sixties. The various crises of the period are understood not only as pressing contemporary concerns, but as a vital test in a wider historical narrative about whether the American experiment has been successful in sustaining the values it was designed to protect.

Foremost among those reconsidering the American experiment in 1962 was the small band of intellectuals, students and activists involved in the inception of the New Left on the shores of Port Huron. The ambitions of this small group, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) numbering some six hundred paid members, enshrined in their manifesto *The Port Huron Statement*, were no less than to ‘shake America to its roots,’ according to former SDS president and New Left historian Todd Gitlin (1987:2). Their efforts, argues James Miller, helped launch ‘America’s last great experiment with democratic idealism’ (1994:16). In a manner far removed from Old Left manifestos dealing with class struggle, *Port Huron* was a statement of existential alienation on the part of the self-acknowledged ‘people of this generation bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inhabit’ (Miller, 1994:329). Where Black Americans and the poor were understood to experience social and political alienation, the relatively affluent middle-class youth felt an existential equivalent, a sense of having been denied contact with their true selves.⁴⁶ According to historian Doug Rossinow, this existential outlook, in itself nothing new, began in the early sixties to acquire a popular basis, and led the nascent New Left to argue that ‘social and political arrangements caused alienation and that only radical change would open the path to authenticity.’ The search for authenticity, therefore, ‘lay at the heart of the New Left’ (1998:4).

The centrality and privilege afforded to authenticity in the thought of the early New Left underpins what Gitlin calls ‘one of the lasting Movement paradoxes’ (1987:108). Despite being a movement of the Left, calling for greater equality and community, the movement was equally attracted to traditional individualism, independent thinking and the ideal of some lost sentiment of being. Partly to distance themselves from the Marxist Leninism of the old left, *The Port Huron Statement* is, ‘steeped in the most traditional kind of American individualism’ particularly the utopian edge of nineteenth century transcendentalism (Gitlin, 1987:107). Indeed, at its most ruggedly individualistic, *Port Huron* declares that:

Men have unrealised potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding and creativity. It is this potential that we regard as crucial and to which we appeal, not to the human potential for violence, unreason, and submission to authority. The goal of man and society should be human independence: a concern not with image or popularity but with finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic.⁴⁷

‘Only in America’ quips Gitlin, ‘could an organisation of the left sound such a ringing praise of ‘human independence.’ Emerson, the prophet of self-reliance, could have trumpeted the self-same notes’ (1987:108). Or, in Rossinow’s terms, ‘the search for authenticity in the New Left was inspired by American triumphalism as much as it was acting against it’ (1998:5). The New Left’s innocent, paradoxical rediscovery of the language and ideals of transcendental individualism would return to haunt the westerns of the Hollywood Renaissance.

Aside from authenticity, the other salient phrase in the lexicon of the early New Left was ‘participatory democracy,’ which Miller describes as ‘familiar and self-evident, even quintessentially American and patriotic’ while also ‘ambiguous, resonating on many layers, elastic and unstable’ (1994:142). ‘Participatory democracy’, while seemingly American and inarguable, carried the implicit provocation that the American public had been absent from the democratic process during the years of complacent affluence. Whatever the phrase meant in terms of practical politics – a return to old fashioned town hall politics or a new decentred socialism – it added an urgent emphasis on activism to the mood of emergent cultures of authenticity in the fifties. Sociologist Amatai Etzioni wrote at the time about the pervasiveness of inauthenticity in the sixties as a kind of Marxist false consciousness

no longer restricted to the working class and symbolised by a sense of disconnectedness with the world, praising the New Left and the ‘active ones’ who aimed to reduce the gap between the individual and society (1968:618-22). Participation in a political movement and the existential ideal of coming into being were therefore united in the New Left; twin poles of an outlook that no longer conceived of authenticity as something irrevocably lost, but something on the verge of being achieved *en masse*.

It would be a mistake however, to identify the embrace of authenticity in American political cultures of the early sixties solely with the New Left. As Rebecca Klatch has documented, the role of the New Right, particularly the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) runs somewhat parallel to the New Left, intersecting and sharing significant bonds (1999:21-4). The YAF’s own manifesto *The Sharon Statement*, while considerably terser than *Port Huron*, shares a youthful break with an older generation, an historical self-consciousness about America being at a significant crossroads, and an affirmation of certain ‘eternal truths such as the transcendent value of individual free will and liberty, the inextricable bond between economic and political freedom, and warning of the dangers of the state acting beyond its right’ (1999:21).⁴⁸ *The Sharon Statement* departs considerably from *Port Huron* in its promotion of unfettered free market economics as the sole guarantee of liberty and its unabashed sense of American exceptionalism and support for national defence. The New Left and The New Right were violently opposed in terms of key issues and objectives, but a nebulous ideal such as authenticity had the potential to appeal across the political spectrum.

The *Port Huron* and *Sharon* help us to understand the political value of notions of authenticity within organisations that grew from small enclaves numbering in the hundreds in 1962 to dominate American politics over the coming two decades. The popular basis for the mass preoccupation with authenticity in the counterculture that emerged later in the decade was provided less by these fledgling political movements, than the considerably larger Christian-led civil rights movement and the associated folk revival,⁴⁹ both of which mobilised the public in unprecedented numbers, with hundreds of thousands joining the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963. As early as 1958, a student Christian civil rights conference was titled ‘The Search for Authentic Experience,’⁵⁰ indicative of the way in which the movement depended upon existentially

inflected and individualist statements, as Black Americans were encouraged to claim their freedom and equality immediately. The folk revival provided a shared platform for key civil-rights figures, intellectuals like Erich Fromm⁵¹ and Herbert Marcuse, popular folk singers like Pete Seeger, Joan Baez and, briefly, a young Bob Dylan.

This rediscovery of the wealth of American folk traditions, married with the popular righteousness of the civil-rights movement, with the call for individuality, equality and togetherness, is effectively characterised by Greil Marcus as a yearning for ‘peace and love in the midst of noise and upheaval’ in a manner that clearly anticipates the hippie counterculture:

It was this purity, this glimpse of a democratic oasis unsullied by commerce or greed, that in the late 1950s and 1960s so many people began to hear in the blues and ballads first recorded in the 1920s and 1930s, by people mainly from small towns and settlements in the South, a strange and foreign place to most who were now listening – music that seemed the product of no ego but of the inherent genius of a people – the people – people one could embrace, and perhaps, become. It was the sound of another country that, once glimpsed from afar, could be felt within oneself. That was the folk revival (1998:21).

Marcus quotes a memorable phrase by folk historian Robert Shelton, one which applies equally well to the rediscovery of the frontier in the counterculture and the western in the Hollywood Renaissance, that before the Kennedy administration coined the term ‘The New Frontier,’ Americans ‘were exploring their own New Frontier, travelling to the country, in actuality or in imagination, trying to find out if there was truly a more exciting life in America’s continuing past’.⁵²

The deliberately impossible tense of the phrase ‘America’s continuing past’ reveals what distinguishes the pursuit of authenticity in the early sixties from nearly any other period. Whereas authenticity had long been conceived as existing only in America’s tragically irretrievable past, the dream (or illusion) passed around in the communality and purposeful optimism of the early sixties was that America’s past existed in parallel with the contemporary United States, and that one only had to step into it; the authentic was no longer lost, instead it could be excavated by sheer will. As Morris Dickstein, in his personal history of sixties culture argues, ‘this hopeful and affecting vision’ represents ‘the sixties at its best, before the travesty of Manson and Altamont, the Weathermen and

the SLA': 'romantic socialism [...] the vision of the redemption of the self, the libertarian socialist dream of a community of redeemed selves in the real world'⁵³ (1997:21).

However, this shared dream of an antidote to political, social and self-alienation that animated the folk revival did not register meaningfully in Hollywood cinema. If only because of the myriad challenges faced by the studios in the period – irremediably declining box office receipts, spiralling production costs, competition from television, the effects of the collapse of vertically integrated production – or because of Hollywood's tendency to lag behind sudden developments in culture, there is little evidence of Hollywood sharing in, or attempting to commercially exploit, the popular cultural stirrings of the folk revival or civil rights movement (the commercial success of *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1962), notwithstanding). The modernist moment westerns might acutely diagnose the decline of western authenticity, but they have little hope for the future; the autumnal moods of *Liberty Valance* and *Ride the High Country* lack the youthful optimism that inauthenticity might be overcome.

By the time the new generation of filmmakers that dominated the Hollywood Renaissance had graduated from apprenticeships in television or film schools, the moment to share in the youthful optimism of the early New Left or the folk revival had passed. The Hollywood Renaissance of the late 1960s and early 1970s shares more with – and is to some degree a product of – the popular counterculture, than it is related to the movements of the early 1960s. By the time *Easy Rider* was released in the summer of 1969, the unified vision of 'participatory democracy' was forgotten, as the movement fragmented into single-issue groups, or dissolved entirely, while others radicalised, adopting Marxist-Leninist language and advocating violent methods, 'turning reveries of freedom into cruel, ineffectual outbursts of terrorism' (Miller, 1987:317). Todd Gitlin recalls similarly that, 'as the organisation [SDS] was pulled apart by cannibal factions, most of the remnants of the old new left stood aside, demoralised, gazing in fascinated horror as sideshow theatrics became the movement's main act (1987:380-1).

The Hollywood Renaissance may have arrived too late to share in the earlier vision, but while the counterculture thrived more or less oblivious to the movement's decline, the same sense of failure, demoralisation, and helplessness that accompanied the collapse of the New Left – amidst a procession

of traumatic events and the unabating war in Vietnam – offer the key to understanding films of the period. The Hollywood Renaissance is a peculiar result of industrial turmoil, the ideological ambiguity and aesthetic liberation of the counterculture, and declining idealism.

Despite the earnest attempts of the early New Left to conceive a politics of authenticity, to transform an elusive and impossible ideal into a practical means for transforming society, the popular counterculture – loosely defined as the sum of American cultural activity, usually anti-establishment and dominated by the generation who came of age in the post-war era, seeking new experiences, aesthetics and social mores – more often than not, did not attempt to translate the ideal of authenticity into practical politics. As Rossinow argues, ‘the search for authenticity was not merely a concern of the existential political new left [...] the widely felt concern with human potential, a popular therapeutic experimentalism and the counterculture of hippies and freaks were often not political at all’ (1998:8). The counterculture repeats the American transcendentalist inclination, argues Gitlin, of putting reformation of the self over society: ‘the mass counterculture owed less to Marx’s dictum and central theme “change the world” than to Thoreau, Emerson and Rimbaud, “change consciousness, change life” (1987:213). The counterculture predominantly sought personal, rather than social totality. This therapeutic conception of authenticity, combining vague anti-government sentiment, identity politics, experimenting with renewed consciousness, and reconnecting with nature, made the politics of the counterculture incoherent, if not altogether apolitical.

It is a common assumption that the counterculture was only embraced on the left, but as Klatch has demonstrated, activists on both the left and right differed in their reaction to the culture of hippies, rock music, and ‘turning on and dropping out’ (1999:134). The counterculture had no manifesto as such, and was almost by definition able to embrace a diverse – even contradictory – range of values. Thus the counterculture became something of a ‘meeting ground for the varying interests and overlapping impulses of the divided generation’ (Klatch, 1999:134). Core countercultural principles and attitudes like the vague desire to do one’s ‘own thing’ or to be ‘true to oneself’ were relatively consensual principles and attitudes, at least among the young, that could be shared by the left and the libertarian right. Indeed, during the last years of the 1960s, as both the SDS and YAF became polarised and internally conflicted, the moderate SDS and libertarians increasingly

intersected and found common ground. A vague and slippery ideal like authenticity stands as the site of intersection; a consensual ideal, oscillating between romantic socialism and libertarianism in its politics, but with an overriding emphasis on the search for better states of being, hard to define, harder still to disagree with. Seen in this way, the counterculture is not so much apolitical as political in a manner which homogenises opposing factions, which flattens difference, and which makes incoherence sound like agreement and generational solidarity.

What the counterculture, the new left and the libertarian right shared, argues Klatch, is an 'image of America as something just and good, as an embodiment of freedom and equality' and as the decade came to a close, all struggled increasingly with 'the disjuncture between the ideal image and reality' (1999:31). By the late sixties, the dreams of the early new left and the folk revival, of the realisation of 'America's continuing past,' or the redemption of the American experiment, were fading. As Ryan and Kellner argue, 'alienation from the 'American Dream' assumed its most striking form during the period of the popular counterculture' (1988:23). The counterculture is marked not only by its search for a more authentic life, its quest for experience, its refusal of social conventions, and its yearning for pre-modern simplicity, but perhaps more acutely, by a feeling of disillusionment, defeat and withdrawal. The counterculture certainly invaded the sphere of popular culture, and the decade's political movements had chipped away at some dominant attitudes – especially regarding politics of identity and the environment – but Nixon's election in 1968 only confirmed that the nation was not only reverting to a prior conservatism, but at the cusp of a neo-conservative counter-revolution.⁵⁴ Barry Langford argues that this 'arc of disappointment' shared by the New Left and the counterculture offers a key to understanding New Hollywood, with films as diverse as *Easy Rider*, *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Nashville* (1975) sharing in a mix of cynicism, anger, and 'a sense of loss, an elegy for 'America' invoked (depending on the perspective of the film) as something either lost or unrealized, a promise and prospect unfulfilled or an achievement betrayed' (2007:163). This abiding combination of cynical anger and mourning would seem contradictory, Langford continues, were it not for the crucial distinction between 'America' the ideal and the United States of America, the nation:

America is distinguished from the lived, material, social/political/economic realities of life in the USA in this period, i.e., *America* ≠ America. In fact, America as constructed in and through the films of New Hollywood is best understood as an absence, or a negative presence: less a coherent set of meanings and values than a term defined by, precisely, its obsolescence. The American promise whose betrayal is so consistently lamented in American popular culture of the early 1970s ought not to be seen as a substantive or verifiable socio-historical entity, or one directly experienced by those who mourn its passing: it is rather a myth of an impossible unity whose apprehension is possible only at the cost of its irremediable loss (2007:163).

This disjuncture between ideal image and nation is expressed succinctly by James Kunen in his autobiographical account of life as a student at Columbia University during the protests of 1968, *The Strawberry Statement*: ‘America. Listen to it. I love the sound. I love what it could mean. I hate what it is’ (2006:79). This peculiar brand of nostalgic excoriating patriotism – again recalling George Hanson’s lament in *Easy Rider* that “this used to be a helluva country” – shared by radicals, hippies and conservatives alike found its clearest expression in the Hollywood Renaissance, fittingly described by Noel King, as ‘the last good predominantly American time American cinema had’ (2004:32). The interrogation and criticism of the meaning and direction of ‘America’ in the Hollywood Renaissance would understandably be carried out in large part within the western genre, whose appeal lies, as Joan Mellen remarks, in its constituting ‘explorations of who we are, dramas in which America’s soul, the national identity, hangs in the balance’ (1994:471).

While the more radical remnants of the New Left may have proposed to “bring the war home,” with American city streets conceived as sites of revolutionary praxis, the popular counterculture increasingly retreated to the American West, the ‘countercultural heterotopic space *par excellence*’ (Shiel, 2007:92), which in turn became synonymous with the search for a more authentic ‘America’. The counterculture retreated from the United States, into the American West – again, recalling Shelton’s phrase, into the American past, whether in imagination or reality – where its core values (wildness, nature, freedom, individualism, simplicity, pre-modern communality) were understood to reside, awaiting rediscovery. As Roderick Nash remarks, ‘wild’ became an approbative

adjective in American speech, the counterculture identifying it with authenticity, freedom, spontaneity and “letting it all hang out” (1973:253). ‘America was starting over in its mind,’ as J. Hoberman puts it, with hippies flooding to the West ‘outfitted in appropriate get-ups’ (2003:238), a trend emblematised in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* (1970) which attempted to tap the zeitgeist with disaffected students (“willing to die, but not of boredom”) escaping to the titular location in Death Valley for a mass orgy against the ancient landscape. In popular music too, perhaps the most important aspect of the youth counterculture, pastoral imagery and frontier fashions abounded, as American folk traditions mixed with the progressive youthful energy of the counterculture.⁵⁵

Given the pervasive embrace of the West, rejection of the urban and the concurrent mourning for a mythical America recently lost or betrayed it is perhaps unsurprising that the period saw a relative boom in the production of westerns, reviving the genre from its nadir in 1962. Indeed a surge in the production of westerns can be charted nearly exactly across the duration of the Hollywood Renaissance period of New Hollywood – commonly conceived as beginning in 1967 and lasting until 1978 at the latest – with a marked yearly increase from 1964-66, peaking in 1969 and 1971 with 28 and 32 westerns released in each year respectively, and a precipitous decline once more from 1975-80 (Fig. A). Set against a backdrop of declining Hollywood production, plummeting box-office receipts and industry-wide recession, with the major studios without exception reaching their lowest point since World War Two, this increase in the production of westerns is more pronounced than the figures alone reveal.⁵⁶ Seen from a wider historical perspective, the western boom of the Hollywood Renaissance represents the last period in which the western could be regarded as a major, if not the most important feature of American film culture.

What is more significant still than the number of westerns produced during this period is the nature of those that were commercially successful. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), which playfully eulogised the outlaw exploits of the legendary Hole in the Wall Gang and flaunted at least some of the stylistic experimentation associated with New Hollywood, like *Bonnie and Clyde* before it, youthfully glamorising anti-establishment rebelliousness, became the most successful film of the year with \$46 million of rentals on a budget of slightly under seven million. The radically

violent and confrontational *The Wild Bunch* also featured in the top twenty grossing films of the same year, making over \$10 million. Arthur Penn's brazenly anti-imperialist *Little Big Man* was the seventh most successful film of 1970, grossing \$30 million. In 1972 *Jeremiah Johnson*, a story of disaffected retreat from the contemporary nation into the wilderness, did over \$45 million of business, based partly on the star presence of Robert Redford. Even more modest successes, like Robert Altman's exhaustively ironic and revisionist *McCabe & Mrs Miller* (1971, \$8.2 million), or Sam Peckinpah's elegiac *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid* (1973, \$8 million) tended to fare slightly better than the defiantly traditional (though not altogether unaltered) Wayne vehicles like *Chisum* (1970, \$6 million), *Big Jake* (1971, \$7.5 million), or *The Cowboys* (1972, \$7.5 million).

The western is perhaps the definitive genre of the Hollywood Renaissance, typifying revisionist approaches to generic material and the incorporation of new stylistic techniques, associated with the new generation of filmmakers working in a changing industry. Yet it is important to note that 'renaissance,' 'countercultural,' or 'revisionist' westerns by up and coming auteurs were only one aspect – albeit the most commercially and critically successful aspect – of the western boom which saw an unparalleled plurality of generic production: Monte Hellman's sparse existential parable *The Shooting* (1966), traditional epics like *Custer of the West* (1967), Sydney Pollack's *The Scalphunters* (1968) which frankly addressed slavery and Indian fighting, Eastwood vehicles indebted to Sergio Leone like *Hang 'em High* (1968) and *Two Mules for Sister Sara* (1970), Howard Hawks's final film *Rio Lobo* (1970) alongside classical Wayne material like *True Grit*, *Chisum*, and *The Undefeated* (1969), the psychedelic rock and roll western *Zachariah* (1971), the studio musical western *Paint your Wagon* (1969), the conservative backlash western *Death of a Gunfighter* (1969), the X-rated revisionist Vietnam allegory *Soldier Blue* (1970), Andy Warhol's homoerotic western parody *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968) and the gritty 'mud and rags' take on the Gunfight at OK Corral "*Doc*" (1971). This cursory sample from the period, omitting the most important westerns by the era's more prominent filmmakers, demonstrates the sheer diversity and adaptability of the genre in the period.

One factor alone cannot explain the heightened presence of the western in the late sixties. Industrial factors like the declining influence and eventual collapse of the Production Code in 1968 – which allowed for the graphic depiction of bloody violence – the importance of the youth

demographic, or the appeal of low-budget location-shot westerns to cash-strapped studios, only go so far to explain the genre's heightened profile. The influence of the imported spaghetti western, Christopher Frayling argues gave the American genre 'a much needed shot in the arm' and should not be underestimated (2006:286). But while Leone's films in particular provided a benchmark for brutally graphic ritualised violence, a heightened and self-conscious visual style, and one of the genre's enduringly iconic characters in Eastwood's 'man with no name,' the influence of the spaghetti western is ostensibly another case of Hollywood absorbing and integrating elements of foreign cinema into existing forms and cannot account for the quantity and diversity of western production in the Hollywood Renaissance period.

Industrial crisis and transition fostered the conditions, but the diverse resurgence of the western from 1967-77 needs to be understood as a part of a wider cultural investment in the West as an antidote for political and social alienation, as a part of the pervasive interrogation of the meaning of America, and as a part of the recently revitalised search for more authentic ways of living. These cultural tendencies are in turn intimately linked to the times, to the raging succession of traumatic events that defined 1968-70 especially: the dispiriting Tet offensive confirming the prolonged failure of the war in Vietnam, the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King puncturing residual hope for the non-violent civil rights movement and liberal reformism, open streetfighting between government authorities and students in major cities, the public disclosure of the massacre of unarmed Vietnamese civilians by U.S. troops at My Lai, the darkening of the hippie dream following the Manson murders and Altamont, and the fatal shooting of six students by the National Guard and police at Kent and Jackson State universities. The influence of these events on films of the period is not straightforward. Despite the freedoms recently afforded to the new generation of filmmakers, now working largely for independent production companies and free from the self-regulation and censorship of the studio era, the key historical events and social changes of the late sixties are not confronted directly in Hollywood cinema of the period: the Vietnam war, student protests, political assassinations, the women's movement, black power, and gay liberation do not feature explicitly in any major Hollywood film of the period. The Hollywood Renaissance is a cinema of absent themes.

This absence of explicit contemporary historical and social references does not mean however that key events had no influence over, or were ignored by, filmmakers of the period. Perhaps the intensity and rapidity of change in the late sixties meant that events were too incomprehensible, controversial, complex or raw to respond to or dramatize directly, but their impact was nonetheless profoundly felt. As Geoff King suggests, ‘sometimes the times are such that they appear to impose themselves forcibly on our consciousness, unmistakably invading the terrain of popular entertainment’ (2002:14). Not only are producers of culture acutely aware of the zeitgeist at such moments in history, audiences are also more likely to be historically conscious, and therefore do not necessarily require clear references to draw connections between films and the times. As Mimi White puts it, ‘the pervasive cultural tenor blowing in the wind meant that even if social issues and cultural change were not explicitly depicted in the narrative, films would be discerned in allegorical or ideological terms’ (2007:26). The manner of the ‘imposition’, to use King’s phrase, of the times on the westerns of the Hollywood Renaissance is clearly not direct or explicit in terms of issues or events confronted, even in the modern western. Allegory is a common way of conceiving of the relation between westerns and contemporary events, with the genre offering readily identifiable and codified substitutions for the Vietnam War, U.S imperialism and capitalism. However, understanding films in their historical context is not simply a matter of decoding intentional devices such as allegory, but rather examining the kind of questions being asked, the kinds of themes being explored, and gauging the tone with which the genre is treated, the affective tenor or mood generated. Rather than reduce the genre to a disguise for contemporary references, it needs to be asked how the genre’s longstanding questions and thematic preoccupations are motivated by, changed in response to, or are inflected with, the concerns and emotions of the present historical moment.

Closing Fast: An Aesthetic of the Apocalypse

Robert Altman’s *McCabe & Mrs Miller* (1971), a revisionist western, by a filmmaker who specialised in updating classical genres with a deeply cynical, unromantic and ironic sensibility, stands apart from the westerns of the period as a total refutation of even the possibility of any authenticity associated

with the historical frontier. Despite structurally resembling any number of classical westerns – a stranger with a ‘big rep’ wanders out of the wilderness into a fledgling frontier town, establishes a small business, and is eventually forced to defend the town from outside forces – the film thoroughly discredits, even mocks, the notion of romantic individualism or authentic community. Altman’s *The Long Goodbye* (1973), placed Raymond Chandler’s recurrent noir hero Philip Marlowe in the context of a contemporary Los Angeles in which he is rendered delusional, bewildered, unable to comprehend his situation, and failing to live up to a self-image fuelled by a corrupt mythology. *McCabe & Mrs Miller* similarly demonstrates the incompatibility of genre, along with its values and patterns of meaning, with a purportedly more realistic interpretation of life in the late nineteenth century.

Altman’s anti-romantic revisionist intent is communicated by the futility of action and refusal of resolution, but moreover it is suffused into every aspect of the film’s visual style and sound design, evident immediately in the opening sequence. Over a slightly anachronistic and melancholy Leonard Cohen ballad about a gambling stranger, McCabe is introduced trudging wearily through a muddy mountain track in the Pacific Northwest, the song commenting upon the inevitability of his failure from the outset. The stranger arrives in the squalid and impoverished town of Presbyterian Church, comprised of a few shacks sticking out of the mud, while the grubby and grim looking population shuffle aimlessly about in the rain. Altman’s telephoto lens creates flat, crowded, sometimes unfocused compositions, while the editing picks out unimportant details in the depressing scene, crucially denying any clear sense of spatial orientation. Muttering incoherently to himself, McCabe enters a dimly lit and crowded saloon, as a series of claustrophobic framings pick out various bored looking townspeople, while the soundtrack is filled with barely discernable overlapping dialogue, mostly comprised of rumours and banalities. Altman’s form transforms what in other hands could be conventional generic material into something challenging, obscure and disconnected.

This denial of clarity in the film’s style is matched by a lack of clarity in McCabe’s thought and morals, and his general ineffectiveness as a western hero. Even aside from his inarticulacy – when he is not mumbling drunkenly he spouts unconvincing received phrases, the shifting tone of Warren Beatty’s performance attesting to the insubstantial nature of his character – his only goal is to establish a cheap brothel (hardly an ideal example of American entrepreneurship), a task for which he

lacks the basic knowledge, being forced to engage the services of the smart, pragmatic madam, Mrs Miller. Later, his objective shrinks yet further to merely “not getting killed” as violent thugs sent by an aggressive mining corporation attempt to buy his business by force, the innumerate and hapless McCabe failing to agree a reasonable price or comprehend their threat. As McCabe consults a local lawyer about the corporation the film delivers its damning satire on the values represented by the frontier in American culture. The lawyer, pompously orating with his thumbs stretching his braces, lectures McCabe on the importance of free enterprise being forged by the “little guy” out of the wilderness, and appealing to his vanity, suggests he will be made a hero for standing up to the monopolistic corporation, adding ludicrously “until people start dying for freedom, they ain’t gonna be free.” McCabe, not reading the irony in this statement or the lawyer’s conceit, grins foolishly, having bought into a lie the film consistently demonstrates has no basis in historical reality. For the myth of the individual standing up for freedom, McCabe will die anonymously and pointlessly; far from achieving heroic fame in death, he is gradually erased as he bleeds to death in a snowstorm, having achieved nothing other than a small measure of revenge against replaceable corporation thugs that will go unrecognised. The townspeople, oblivious to McCabe’s meaningless sacrifice, meanwhile fight to save the town’s spindly, unfinished and unused church in another futile gesture.

McCabe & Mrs Miller as a whole depends upon association with the classical western for its full depth of meaning and significance, but it is in its allusion to John Ford in its closing moments in particular that Altman’s attitude to the western needs to be understood. Ford’s own unfinished church in *My Darling Clementine* (1946), quite in contrast to Altman’s, is a profound symbol of hope, balance and community at a treasured point of precarious balance in American history. As Wyatt Earp and Clementine, frontier law and civilized domesticity respectively, tentatively dance at the church’s inauguration under fluttering stars and stripes and against the ancient sanctifying backdrop of Monument Valley, there can be no doubt that Ford treasures the hopefulness represented by the newly formed frontier community. Ford reminds us at the end of *My Darling Clementine* and throughout *Liberty Valance*, that such moments are also cause for regret; the promise of Wyatt and Clementine is bound to go unfulfilled, the moment of balance tragically unsustainable. Altman’s film encourages

associations with the Fordian frontier myth, argues Robert Kolker, only to confirm that he has no such stake in the 'western mythos':

A man with a late sixties, early seventies consciousness, he sees the westerns, and most other film genres, along with the attitudes and ideology they embody, not as healing and bonding lies – which is the way Ford saw the western – but merely as lies. Like Ford, Altman responds to the elegiac element always latent in any myth of the past. But, unlike Ford, he does not mourn the passing of the frontier and investigate the coming of law and order: he mourns rather the lost possibility of community and the enforced isolation of its members (2000:339).

What the frontier represents for Altman, Kolker continues, is simply 'the inevitable movement of capitalism, with its attendant brutality, betrayals and selfishness' (2000:351). One can justifiably go even further: Altman does not so much mourn a 'lost possibility,' rather the fact that no possibility existed in the first place; no alternative, merely an unending guarantee of powerlessness, alienation and isolation sustained and masked by baseless ideas of romantic individualism. *McCabe & Mrs Miller* thus comes as close as any Hollywood Renaissance film to ideological critique; inhabiting the cultural form generated by the frontier myth and forcing it to bare its contradictions and fallacies. Even the slightest residue of hope suggested, in typical Hollywood fashion, by the romantic B-plot, is found wanting, as McCabe and Mrs Miller's relationship is not allowed to develop beyond a doomed business partnership and transactional and commodified sex. There is no authenticity to be found in *McCabe & Mrs Miller*, no nostalgic utopianism; its only regret is the West itself and its place in American culture, which it treats, in all its grimy and fragmented verisimilitude with defeated indifference, lethargy and irony.

With this rather helpless and depressing outlook, Robin Wood suggests that Altman, along with his contemporaries Penn and Peckinpah, adopted somewhat the same position as Godard up to *Pierrot le fou* (1965): 'rejecting the established society in which they live, but having no constructive social/political alternative to offer, their logical gravitation is to the outsider, the outcast and the criminal' (1986:32). Undeniably there are similarities between Altman's *McCabe & Mrs Miller* and Peckinpah's major western of the period *The Wild Bunch* (I will comment upon Penn separately in the following chapter): both are to some degree 'revisionist', both feature morally compromised or outlaw

protagonists, both take a dim view of historical progress and the forces of industrial capitalism, both strive for historical verisimilitude and graphic representations of physical violence, and both end on a relatively downbeat note with the less than straightforward heroic deaths of their protagonists.

Altman and Peckinpah both realise the bad faith involved in sustaining a romantic image of the frontier as the embodiment of American values or ideals. However, the tone and aesthetics of *McCabe & Mrs Miller* and *The Wild Bunch* are starkly opposed. Altman is content to have no illusions about the frontier, treating the inevitable failure of romantic individualism with a kind of mannered resignation and disdainful irony. Peckinpah, in contrast, while fully aware of the same historical realities that Altman criticises, is deeply invested in the western (eight of his fourteen features were westerns of sorts), and desperate to redeem some aspect of American experience contained within the genre; far from Altman's critical distance, *The Wild Bunch* is saturated with deeply emotional ambivalence, the very form of the film energised by the drive to get hold of something. The critic and later writer/director Paul Schrader clearly articulated the emotive ambivalence of *The Wild Bunch* in an article written soon after the film's release in 1969:

The Wild Bunch is a powerful film because it comes from the gut of America, and from a man who is trying to get America out of his gut. The trauma of ex-patriotism is a common theme in American art, but nowhere is the pain quite so evident as in the life of Sam Peckinpah. *The Wild Bunch* is the agony of a Westerner who stayed too long, and it is the agony of America.⁵⁷

If *The Wild Bunch* comes from the gut of America, *McCabe & Mrs Miller* comes from the head. With Peckinpah, the cultural leitmotif of mourning 'America' in contrast to life in the present United States reaches its apotheosis: no longer simply the mourning of some lapsed possibility, but rather the rage that accompanies the realisation that this possibility was doomed from the outset. *The Wild Bunch* is both a film of its moment – effectively registering a very contemporary combination of violent rage and romantic yearning – and a landmark work of art in a long American tradition dating back to Thoreau. The something that Peckinpah strives to get a hold of in *The Wild Bunch*, might be a familiar brand of American Authenticity – loyalty, integrity, meaningful work, freedom of movement, contact with nature – but the ideal is uniquely problematized and treated with ambivalence throughout the film. As such, *The Wild Bunch* forms the climax to the narrative being espoused throughout this

chapter: as the sixties closed explosively, a disillusioned hangover from recent utopianism in the air, Peckinpah returns to the end of the West, full of 'the agony of America,' and with a bunch of fittingly desperate, compromised and morally suspect individuals, makes a final push for American Authenticity south of the border.

Early in the film *Pike Bishop* (William Holden) poignantly and succinctly summarises the predicament faced by the band of outlaws and the wider thematic concerns of Peckinpah's film as he questions the feasibility of their existence and work in a rapidly changing world: "We've got to think beyond our guns. Those days are closing fast." *The Wild Bunch*, like *Ride the High Country*, the present-day sections of *Liberty Valance*, and numerous other sixties westerns, is set in a rapidly modernising West in which the open territory and relative lawlessness of the frontier is in its final stages. The irony of Pike's realisation is not only that the Bunch will inevitably fail to think "beyond their guns", but that the frontier is not so much closing as definitively closed. It is 1913, a full two decades after Frederick Jackson Turner reflected upon the end of the territorial expansion of the United States in his paper at the Columbian Exposition, and modern technological civilization is firmly established. Pike has grasped the implications of this transition for the outlaw lifestyle too late and therefore his use of the present participle 'closing' speaks less of any decisive historical turning point but rather of the gradual entrapment of the Bunch by the forces closing in on them, and their realisation of the futility of continued resistance or retreat.

Peckinpah develops this theme of the closing-in of constrictive forces from the outset with the opening shots of the Bunch, unconvincingly disguised in U.S. army uniforms making their way along a railroad on horseback through the built-up outskirts of the Texan town of Starbuck. Their nervous glances are intercut with ambiguous yet unignorably symbolic images of a group of children torturing scorpions by trapping them on top of an ant-hill. Most obviously, the image of the scorpions impotently writhing and stinging against a sea of aggressive red ants foreshadows the film's finale at the fort of Agua Verde, as the Bunch are overrun, despite their superior marksmanship, by sheer numbers of largely anonymous Mexican soldiers. In the close-up reactions of the children, some impassive, others taking evident joy in the game, it is tempting to read a comment upon a society devoid of innocence and inherently disposed to cruelty and violence (I will discuss the role of children

in the film in greater detail shortly). More subtly however, the scorpions serve to introduce the theme of entrapment and enclosure that pervades the film. As Michael Bliss notes in his analysis of the sequence, the sense of enclosure is trebled, as the insects are trapped by a wooded cage, hemmed in by children and 'enclosed within the encompassing gaze of the Bunch' (1999:106). This is heightened further still as the Bunch flee the aftermath of the chaotic shoot-out in Starbuck. The children, still mesmerised by the struggling insects, pile burning kindling on top of the ant-hill, the smouldering thicket finally obscuring the scorpions altogether: no escape.

The obtrusive symbolism of the scorpions not only engages the spectator in the active creation of meaning, it serves to mask the lack of a conventional exposition shot of the town. We are not permitted to see the town from the outside, rather the voice of a preacher delivering a speech to the Temperance Union is overlaid on the close-up of the insects, associatively linking the grim image to the town in which we are thrust into the centre. Our introduction to American civilization is therefore the meeting of sour-faced Puritans dressed in black and receiving a lecture on the dangers of alcohol (we do not have to consult Peckinpah's biography to sense his contempt for this kind of dour abstemiousness). Peckinpah's scorn is conveyed through the Union's tunelessly brassy rendition of 'Shall We Gather at the River,' John Ford's hymn of community and optimism, here rendered inane, repressive and unmistakably ironic. As the Bunch trepidatiously march towards their target, the offices of the Texas Railroad, in a series of slow tracking shots, the thoroughly modern, even pleasant, character of the town is unfurled: trees and park benches beside paved streets, women in stylish dresses twirling parasols, men in elegant suits, telephone lines, and redbrick civic architecture; this is no frontier town and the Bunch look awkward and out of place (Fig. 13).

As the Bunch rob the offices, they are surrounded by a group of mercenaries led by Pike's old partner Deke Thornton (Robert Ryan), hired by the railroad magnate Harrigan. The pressure-cooker atmosphere builds through gradually accelerating cross-cutting between the Bunch's robbery, Thornton's squabbling hired guns on the opposite roof and the hapless Temperance Union marching down the main street. An accelerating heartbeat thumps on the soundtrack before the tension is finally broken as the manager of the railroad office is kicked onto the street, unleashing a barrage of gunfire in the first of the film's spectacular set-pieces of chaotic violence. The radical stylistic innovations

contained in this opening sequence and the Agua Verde finale have been well documented:

Peckinpah, together with cinematographer Lucien Ballard and editor Lou Lombardo, conceived an unprecedentedly rapid-fire montage style (average shot lengths as short as 0.46 seconds in the action set-pieces); created temporal discontinuity with the expressive cross-cutting between multiple registers of slow and normal-motion; deployed spatially disorientating combinations of whip-pans, rapid zooms, wide shots and extreme close-ups; and pioneered the use of explosive squibs packed with realistic blood (Langford, 2010:142). The effect of these technical innovations is a representation of violence that is at once shocking, visceral and corporeal – conveying the physical sensation of bodies being torn apart by gunfire and the adrenal rush of fighting – and exhilarating, breathless, even balletic. Paul Seydor has explored this duality in detail, arguing that Peckinpah’s representation of violence formally imitates his own ambivalence toward the role and value of violence in society (1997:190). The question of violence and its relevance to authenticity will be explored in due course. A subtler effect of the Starbuck shoot-out, besides the shock and thrill of violence, is fulfilling the creeping sense of enclosure and entrapment generated by the opening sequence. The Bunch are drawn into a singularity in the centre of the modern town and surrounded by forces of aggressive industrial capitalism and corrupt law to such an extent that when the inevitable explosion of violence is triggered, the spectator too is implicated, losing all clear sense of spatial orientation, trapped within the barrage of agonised faces, pulverised bodies, splintering wood and dust. Importantly, with the lack of clear spatial orientation comes a concomitant lack of moral co-ordinates, with the Bunch, Thornton, and Harrigan’s men all blasting away careless of the many unarmed citizens – with whom we feel little sympathy – caught in the crossfire.

The Bunch flee to Mexico only to discover they were duped into stealing sacks of steel washers instead of gold, confirming the senselessness of the slaughter in Starbuck. That night, Pike and Dutch pass a bottle of whiskey back and forth and reflect upon the obsolescence of their way of life. Pike says he would “like to make one last score than back off,” to which Dutch responds “back off to what?” The question is left hanging in the air for there is no easy answer; the remainder of the film is in a sense a doomed attempt to find one. Pike and Dutch are squeezed out of a modern America in which they find themselves spatially restricted and pursued, yet Mexico – the traditional

repository of ‘America’ and refuge when the United States becomes too modern – is found to be untenable, beset by war and dictatorial generals. And besides, Pike and kind do not know how to “back off”; they are habituated, perhaps naturally inclined, to violent outlawry, and scarcely able to resist killing each other. Crucially, the Bunch themselves do not represent any ideal or alternative. *The Wild Bunch* is not, unlike *Lonely Are The Brave* or any number of late Wayne vehicles, a tale of an authentic westerner fighting against an increasingly debased modern world with which they are at odds. The Bunch are already fallen, as much a part of modern civilization as they are against it.

In a fallen and degraded world, and with no ready answer to the question “back off to what?”, violence is pervasive and inevitable, but not all violence, Peckinpah appears to suggest, is as regrettable or as meaningless as the chaotic slaughter in Starbuck. In the build-up to the film’s concluding massacre at Agua Verde in particular, Peckinpah provocatively suggests the possibility of redemption through authentic violence, fully realising what I described in Chapter One as ‘the unsettling ramifications of American Authenticity’ through a reading of Robert Warshaw’s essay on the westerner. Violence is inherently bound up with safer notions of pre-modern living and moral individualism, either used in the pursuit of the authentic or compensating for its absence. The potentially unsettling and barbaric notion of authentic violence is traditionally kept in check in the western through adherence to a loosely defined set of codes dictating the fair and proper use of violent force outside of institutions of law (good guys don’t shoot people in the back, duels are carefully staged, and so forth), all of which are discarded in the opening minutes of *The Wild Bunch*. Most of the violence in the film is senseless, spontaneous, cruel, and used in the pursuit of sadistic pleasure or short-term monetary gain – hardly authentic in any conventional sense – but the Agua Verde finale is different. As the Bunch return to the fort to rescue Angel, who is being tortured by the corrupt and decadent general Mapache, and being dragged behind his new automobile, they discover a higher form of violence: redemptive, cathartic, excessive, simultaneously self-destructive and self-realising. Significantly, this kind of violence does not erupt spontaneously as a result of various forces of enclosure, as in the Starbuck sequence, but rather is decided upon by Pike deliberately in two key moments:

Taking refuge from the pursuing Thornton and having successfully sold stolen weapons to Mapache, the Bunch return to Agua Verde where the general blearily surveys the dying embers of a debauched celebration, the scene strewn with confetti, champagne and dancing women, with the newly acquired Gatling-gun as the guest of honour. In a celebrated scene, Pike, having visited a young prostitute, rounds up his remaining three partners in a surely suicidal mission to rescue Angel. The scene is nearly wordless, comprised mainly of emotionally ambiguous looks between Pike and the young woman, and its importance as a ‘pivot point’ (Seydor, 1997:168) is signalled without making explicit reference to the decision Pike has come to or his motivation for doing so. As Steven Prince suggests, ‘to understand Pike’s painful awakening to his own failure as a human being, the viewer must contextualise this scene with the earlier narrative material’ based only on a series of close-ups of William Holden’s face (1998:123). In the dim candlelit bordello, Pike wearily puts on his shirt and struggles to pull on his boots, as the young Mexican prostitute – possibly four decades his junior – gently washes her shoulders, neck and chest with a cloth. A softly plucked guitar ballad accompanies a series of wordless cuts between the pair, subtly drawing closer to Pike’s lined face, appearing pained and slightly disgusted, as he weighs up the final drops of a bottle and listens to the cries of the woman’s baby. From the adjacent room the sound of the Gorch brothers squabbling with another prostitute over money disturbs the warm, if unmistakably melancholic and sordid, tranquillity of the scene. Pike’s awareness of his age, the pain from old wounds, the beauty of the young woman (reminiscent of Pike’s lover killed in an earlier flashback), the baby crying on the floor (emphasised with a zoom), the final swig from the bottle, and finally, the Gorchs’s arguments, combine to produce a kind of revelation: Pike has failed to redeem or escape a past marked by personal betrayal and loss, his reputation as “the best” is a lie, and any possibility of backing off to a better life has already closed around him. Standing in the doorway, the Gorch brothers immediately recognising his changed expression, Pike repeats the film’s often-repeated imperative “Let’s go”, this time phrased solemnly, obviously meaning more than simply, “Let’s leave.” While still a call to action, “Let’s go” acquires an existential and moral dimension: let’s act, let’s do what’s right, let’s end it all, let’s die together. Lyle replies rhetorically with gravity “why not?” – obviously there is no answer, beyond more time wasted, more running to escape the inevitable, more unsatisfying pursuit of money and

pleasure – and Dutch, waiting outside, needs only to look at the three men to join them (Fig. 14).

Peckinpah confirms their newfound unity and purpose in a now iconic long-lens shot of the Bunch swaggering four-abreast towards the camera in the shimmering heat, accompanied by funereal singing and a tense marching snare drum.

The second key moment in which Pike decides upon an authentic course of violent action occurs as the Bunch confront Mapache demanding the release of Angel. As Mapache feigns handing him over he suddenly cuts the already-bloodied Angel's throat in clear view of the Bunch and the camera (out of pride or perhaps mirroring Pike's invitation to mutually assured self-destruction). Pike and Dutch promptly shoot the general dead, his body collapsing and spurting blood in slow-motion, rapidly intercut with reaction shots of soldiers raising their hands. The Bunch's gorily stylish execution of Mapache is instinctive and morally unproblematic; it does not however achieve what Pike intended with his "Let's go," nor does it raise the problem of authentic violence. After the general is killed there is a curious abatement. Time feels frozen or distended as the Bunch glance around the arena-like ruins and the camera pans rapidly across the shocked faces of Mapache's cadre. The duration of this stalemate (thirty-three seconds in real time, although it feels longer) gives the spectator pause to consider the possibility that the Bunch, having lost and immediately avenged Angel, could now walk away with their lives, perhaps even hailed as liberators. However, as Dutch lets out an irrepressible giggle and grins at Pike, this possibility is foreclosed. As Seydor comments, Pike has options, but they are no good with the realisation of the impossibility of backing off in an enclosing modern world, with the revelation that the pursuit of money and women will not expunge the humiliation of his past: 'It isn't enough, it cannot sustain, and so it places him in a situation as authentically tragic as any a man can know: walk away, his life's a fraud; stay and fight, his life's over' (1997:169). As Pike's face relaxes into the same resolve he displayed in the doorway of the bordello, he straightens up and pivots, before decisively taking aim at the unarmed German military advisor – a representative of imperialism and the coming industrial slaughter in Europe – standing at the general's table and shoots him through the heart.

With the assassination of the German advisor Pike chooses to unleash a violent chaotic death upon all the inhabitants of Agua Verde, including himself. The slaughter is no heroic suicide mission (over the

course of the massacre the Bunch indiscriminately cut through scores of soldiers with the general's Gatling-gun, shoot unarmed citizens and use women as shields) rather a kind of amoral purging of an irredeemable world, a revelling in the rush of fighting having exhausted all other pleasures, and a deliberate embrace of death, however dubiously meaningful, as the only real inevitability. Pike arrives, in the two moments I have described, at the decision that violent death is the only solution, the only authentic, uncompromised course of action in a degraded modern world. Lacking stable moral co-ordinates through which to understand Pike's decision and simultaneously immersed (perhaps repulsed and exhilarated in equal measure) and encouraged to scrutinise the violent spectacle objectively (like Thornton through the binoculars outside Agua Verde), the spectator is thereby forced to engage with the problem of authentic violence.⁵⁸ Peckinpah neither offers straightforward justification for the Bunch's actions, nor 'an explicit denunciation of this kind of violence,' as Slotkin suggests, and 'the audience is thus engaged with an aesthetic equivalent of the ethical problem of violence' (1992:597).

That *The Wild Bunch* at the very least entertains the notion of indiscriminate self-destructive violence as a kind of solution to inescapable powerlessness and entrapment by advancing modern civilization, and that it provides opportunity for the spectator to vicariously indulge in the spectacle of this purging, makes the film uniquely radical and provocative. Indeed, in the controversy that followed the film's release, Peckinpah attempted to moderate the perception of the film as sharing in the Bunch's desire for violent death, but continued to stress his own ambivalence towards violence as something lamentably inherent and unavoidable in human society:

Actually it's an anti-violence film because I use violence as it is. It's ugly, brutalizing and bloody fucking awful. It's not fun and games and cowboys and Indians, it's a terrible, ugly thing [...] And yet there's a certain response you get from it, an excitement, because we're all violent people, we have violence within us.⁵⁹

Taking Peckinpah at his word has led some critics to reduce the violence in *The Wild Bunch* to an expression of Robert Ardrey's theories of the 'territorial imperative' (Peckinpah occasionally referenced Ardrey's ideas about the latent savagery of man in interviews⁶⁰), or to a vague allegory about the ongoing bloodshed in Vietnam, both of which fail to recognise the complex and political

meanings of violence in the film.⁶¹ Gilberto Perez suggests that the ‘image of civilized violence’ cultivated in westerns, is necessarily ‘an image of politics, of the management of power’ and that *The Wild Bunch* in particular evidences the inability to sustain this image of civilised (and civilising) American violence (1998:235). Violence in *The Wild Bunch* is savage, destructive and ugly – albeit aestheticised and thrilling – but most importantly, it is born out of powerlessness and hopelessness. Drawing upon Hannah Arendt’s ideas in *On Violence* about violence stemming psychologically from weakness and impotence and politically as a substitute for the loss of power, Michael Bliss argues that the Bunch’s propensity for violence should be understood as a result of frustration, self-loathing, and powerlessness (1999:120).

This image of violence as a response to political powerlessness and frustration offers a more compelling connection between the film and the context of the late sixties than any specific allegory of the Vietnam War, political assassinations, or student protests. Through Pike’s realisation of his personal failings, his homelessness in the world, his ultimate powerlessness, the impossibility of ‘backing off,’ and embrace of frustrated self-destructive violence, Peckinpah offers a grim interpretation of American history that resonated with contemporary mood of declining utopianism and helplessness. Todd Gitlin fittingly describes the increasing rage and frustration of the New Left in the late sixties as the realisation that ‘there had to be something radically, unredeemably wrong at the dark heart of America’:

Against the weight of this history, if we thought we could stand for a positive ideal, we were kidding ourselves. The only affirmative position was negation. To put it mildly, this was not the mood to generate ideas about a reconstruction of politics. The best that could be claimed for [America] was the purity of a scourging – the aesthetic of the apocalypse, not a political vision (1987:256-7).

The sense among the radical edge of the New Left that America was beyond redemption, that politics were ineffectual, and that violent negation was the only authentic course of action remaining is aptly illustrated by the massacre at Agua Verde. Indeed, radical ‘Yippie’ Stew Albert recommended *The Wild Bunch* on its release in the countercultural underground newspaper *The Berkeley Tribe*, as a ‘revolutionary film’ that showed you had to ‘pick up the gun.’⁶² A reductive appropriation, perhaps,

but one which nonetheless demonstrates how the film resonated with the frustrated rage of the late sixties. As Stephen Prince argues, the violence of the film is not simply a case of Peckinpah taking maximum advantage of relaxed censorship following the introduction of the MPAA ratings system, but moreover a result of ‘the climate of violence endemic to the era and a conscious response to it, not a mere reflection of it’ (1998:27). For Peckinpah, the violence of the late sixties represents a particularly intense eruption of the violent energy inherent to and coursing through American history.⁶³ If, as Jim Kitses states in his study of the film, ‘*The Wild Bunch* is America’ (2004:223), Pike’s embrace of death at Agua Verde would suggest that in an inescapably violent nation, there can be no authenticity outside of violence.

However, Pike and Peckinpah’s view should not be unreservedly conflated, despite Pike partly functioning, as Peckinpah’s biographer David Weddle puts it, as the director’s ‘mythic alter-ego,’⁶⁴ nor should the film’s meaning be drawn solely from its violent conclusion; *The Wild Bunch* as a whole is too complex and contradictory to be reduced to a nihilistic death wish. For Pike and the Bunch, authenticity might only reside in their ‘existential moment’ that is the decision to avenge Angel and usher in a wave of purging violence, but Peckinpah suggests alternatives throughout the film, albeit none that can be sustained or held unconditionally.

Between the repressive entrapment of the modern American town and the decadent cruelty of Mapache’s citadel, there are only the uninhabitable – if romantically rugged, even sublime – landscapes of vast dunes and cauldron-like canyons, adding to the sense that the Bunch have nowhere to go. The important exception to these variously impossible spaces is found in the Bunch’s detour to Angel’s village on their way to Agua Verde, an idyllic and tantalisingly unobtainable alternative, conceived in opposition to all other social spaces and landscapes in the film. Angel’s village is a knowingly exoticised and luminescent daydream of pre-modern communal living, touched perhaps by the pastoral imagination of the American counterculture. Under a canopy of trees children jump into a still lagoon, shafts of sunlight cut through the smoke of a banquet being prepared, the Bunch rest and dance, and the very style of the film relaxes into a series of long and medium shots. In contrast to the fallen world the rest of the film constructs, Angel’s village appears to the Bunch as a fragile Eden, offering a glimpse of an authentic life and the pursuit of something other than money. The usually

violent and bickering Gorch brothers revert to a childlike state, entranced by a teenage girl and a game of cat's cradle, prompting the village elder Don José's famous comment to Pike, "We all want to be children again, even the worst of us – perhaps the worst of us most of all," at once an acknowledgement of the Bunch's occupation as outlaws, and a line which prompts reflection upon the film's recurrent motif of children.

From the children torturing scorpions in the opening, to the boy and girl cowering in the aftermath of the Starbuck shooting, to the crying baby which prompts Pike's decision to rescue Angel, to the child-soldier who fatally shoots Pike in the final slaughter, *The Wild Bunch* is filled with images of childhood and the often expressionless faces of children peering out at the Bunch in doorways and behind walls. However, as Michael Bliss points out, 'the childlike nature to which Don José alludes, by which he seems to mean a state of innocence, is not present in the film' (1999:107). Outside of Angel's village at least, children are shown imitating or bearing witness to the violence surrounding them. Although Peckinpah is keen to demonstrate how children are inevitably corrupted by the world around them and how the supposed innocence of childhood is little more than a social construct or fantasy shared by adults, it is also not simply the case, as some critics would have it, that 'child and killer mirror each other' (Slotkin, 1992:598). As Seydor argues, Peckinpah uses children to provide a perspective from 'a sensibility without the resources for moral evaluation' (1997:198); that is, their innocence is not goodness, but rather the possession of unclouded vision which allows them to gaze upon the absurdity of the world around them.

As the Bunch first escape into Mexico, they pause at the bank of the Rio Grande and Angel sighs "Ah, Mexico, *lindo*" to which the Lyle Gorch retorts "I don't see what's so *lindo* about it – looks like more Texas to me." Angel replies simply, "Ah, you have no eyes." It is this childlike perspective that the Bunch appear to regain, if only slightly, at Angel's village; their first step towards the pursuit of something higher than the next big score. However, just as this childlike perspective is inevitably clouded and corrupted, the idyll of Angel's village only offers a glimpse of what might be and cannot sustain as an alternative. The village is so diametrically opposed to the spaces dominated by unavoidable forces of technological modernity, industrial capitalism, law and military conquest that the rest of the film maps out, it appears strange and insubstantial, like a mirage. Mark Crispin

Miller notes this illusoriness as he points out that the village ‘appears as fresh and Edenic as an oasis’ despite supposedly having just been ransacked by Mapache’s forces (1975:4). Bliss goes further, describing the sequence as a ‘suspiciously realised interlude’:

The sincerity of the director’s romantic intentions is the only genuine part of these scenes; the rest represents Peckinpah’s admirable but (given the film’s overall tone) inappropriate attempt to invoke feelings of possibility rather than entrapment, freedom rather than determinism, concepts that in the context of the film’s emphasis on limitation seem quaint but, ultimately forced and false (1999:112).

The incongruity of the village sequence and the forced nature of Peckinpah’s romanticism do however perform a vital function in terms of authenticity (*Major Dundee* (1965) features no such romanticisation of Mexico). The sincere hope for the alternative represented by the village is held up against the overwhelming forces that surround it and the inability of the Bunch to truly see it, thereby allowing the spectator to identify with a genuine hope utterly doomed from the outset. The agony of *The Wild Bunch*, to adapt Paul Schrader’s phrase, is the realisation that the ideal glimpsed in Angel’s village is a mirage draped over reality, and that there can be no straightforward retreat from society. The Bunch’s ride out of the village in a series of stately tracking shots, the villagers waving farewell and singing ‘La Golondria,’ a ballad about the longing for home, marks their return to reality and the inevitability of their failure. As if to emphasise the gulf between the illusory ideal represented by the village and the considerably darker ideal embraced by the Bunch as a last resort, ‘La Golondria’ is sung by a group of soldiers as the Bunch prepare to rescue Angel. The ballad is reprised one last time over the final shot of the film, this time in eulogy, over a sepia-toned flashback of the Bunch leaving the village riding away from the camera. The image freezes as the men disappear from view, concluding the film at the precise moment the authentic ideal dissipated. Leonard Engel, in an article placing Peckinpah within the literary traditions of James Fenimore Cooper, unintentionally yet appropriately describes this final image of *The Wild Bunch* in making a point about the role of Cooper’s noble savage hero Natty Bumppo:

Cooper’s artistic achievement [...] is his ability not only to endow Natty with epic qualities, but to capture and dramatise the mythic moment, that balanced, poised, seemingly timeless

instant, when the dream of harmony between man and nature is frozen – just prior to its disappearance (1988:23).

In Chapter One, I described American Authenticity as being conceived in westerns as a ‘supreme point’ of impossible balance between wilderness and civilization, unattainable as it is realised only in remembrance. The final freeze-frame of *The Wild Bunch* would appear to be a fitting case, enshrining the exact moment the authentic ideal dissipated without the Bunch realising, but with the crucial difference that Peckinpah shows the ideal to be illusory and incompatible with the harsh realities of modern existence.

Peckinpah desperately wants to believe in the western and its core values of rugged individualism, loyalty, courage and freedom, but is all too aware of the incompatibility of these values with any rational interpretation of American history or any hope for the American future. Pike and the gang are not like Steve and Gil in *Ride the High Country*, heroic westerners corrupted by the modern world, but rather a deeply flawed group of individuals struggling to live up to and define any values that go beyond the dirty work of killing and pursuing money. The past is not idealised in *The Wild Bunch*, but rather shown as a series of staged and artificial-looking moments of trauma – torture and imprisonment, betrayal, murder, the failure to form loving human relationships – that intrude upon the present. Altogether the film bitterly demonstrates how the ideology of the frontier and the ideal of America lamentably have little to do with life in the United States.⁶⁵ As Christopher Sharrett argues, *The Wild Bunch*’s ‘parable of America’ is precisely this irreconcilable conflict between the romantic and the real, the corruption of American idealism, and the recognition of how the ‘past was probably a deceit’ (1988:97). The film’s coda, which has Deke Thornton surveying the carnage of Agua Verde, before joining up with Sykes and Don José, in support of the revolutionary forces of Pancho Villa, somewhat alleviates this depressing and cynical conclusion. Rather than join the Bunch in nihilistic death, Sykes suggests he and Deke compromise and pursue meaningful work in support of social change in the absence of American ideals. Syke’s world-weary expression, “It’s not like it used to be, but it’ll do” suggests, not entirely convincingly, an alternative to the two poles represented by Angel’s village and Agua Verde. ‘While the film suggests revolution is the only avenue to social transformation,’ Sharrett concludes, ‘such convictions cannot mitigate the jaundiced view of the entire

American adventure' (1988:100). As Sykes and Deke resign themselves to making do, riding off with a small band of revolutionaries into a sandstorm, we are left with superimposed flashbacks of the Bunch laughing. Brief moments of loyalty, togetherness and joy, dubiously earned, and wrested from an inexorable path towards bloody destruction; in the absence of any realistic hope for authenticity, and with the inevitable failure of romantic illusions, that is the only hope Peckinpah can offer.

Hopper's Last Stand

John Wayne did not approve of *The Wild Bunch*. In the same *Playboy* interview in which he blasted student radicals and black militants, bemoaned the demise of patriotism and warned of communist indoctrination, he said he found its representation of violence "distasteful" but that "it would have been a good picture without the gore." He blamed the rise of explicit screen violence on the "satiating" effects of war on television.⁶⁶ The loss of the sanitised, morally justifiable or humorous forms of violence that *The Wild Bunch* threatened to instigate, and with it the supposed loss of innocence of Hollywood, appeared more "distasteful" to Wayne than the film's ideological critique. For all its flirtation with ideas of revolutionary violence and its excoriating perspective on history, *The Wild Bunch* manages to articulate an attraction to romantic American ideals in spite of their demonstrable unfeasibility; against his better judgement, Peckinpah still wants to believe in the western. *The Wild Bunch* retains an inherent ideological ambiguity by virtue of its working firmly within the generic tradition of the western and mourning the loss of the very ideals it criticises.

While *The Wild Bunch* was in cinemas, John Wayne's erstwhile adversary Dennis Hopper began work on his ill-fated follow-up to *Easy Rider*, *The Last Movie* (1971), eventually released two years later. Described by Peter Biskind as 'an inspired Pirandellian meditation on westerns, colonialism and death' (1998:124), *The Last Movie* represents the high watermark of the Hollywood Renaissance's critical engagement with the western, the American Dream and authenticity. Whereas the revisionist ideological critiques of *McCabe & Mrs Miller* and *The Wild Bunch* are carried out broadly within the codes and conventions of the genre and contained within the narrative, Hopper's film attempts to deconstruct the western from the outside and within simultaneously, in a multi-

layered analysis of the effects of Hollywood mythology on both individual psychology and society. Ruminating on American cultural imperialism and blurring the boundary between reality and artifice through an insistently fragmentary and tonally shifting form, oscillating freely between didacticism, parody, satire and lyricism, *The Last Movie* is the most radical western of the Hollywood Renaissance. David E. James describes Hopper's film as a 'rigorous examination, not only of the form and content of the western, but also of its social function' arguing that it stands as 'a comprehensive and fully articulate analysis of capitalist cinema' (1983:34). However, as I will demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter, even a film as critical of the western and its attendant values as *The Last Movie*, ultimately fails to wholly repudiate or expose American Authenticity as ideology; the sense that something about the western that could be salvaged and recalibrated as a solution to contemporary alienation remains.

The inspiration for *The Last Movie* came as Hopper worked with John Wayne and Henry Hathaway on *The Sons of Katie Elder* in Durango, Mexico, and considered the impact of the American production on the local population: "I thought, my God, what's going to happen when the movie leaves and the natives are left living in these western sets?" In late 1965, Hopper completed a ninety page treatment with screenwriter Stewart Stern titled *The Last Movie or Boo Hoo in Tinseltown* (Winkler, 2011:82-4). This question of the impact of Hollywood on an innocent native population forms the basic plot of the film. Like Godard's *Contempt* (1963) or Fellini's *8½* (1963) *The Last Movie* follows the European art film vogue for inherently reflexive films about filmmaking, what David E. James calls the 'pandemic trope of sixties filmmaking' (1989:283), in this case depicting a troubled production of a "lousy western" about the death of Billy the Kid being shot on location high in the Andes mountains.⁶⁷ After the accidental death of a stuntman, the film finally wraps and Kansas (Hopper), a stuntman and wrangler on the production, decides to stay in Chinchero, Peru, thinking more Hollywood productions will make use of the location and sets. As he embarks upon a relationship with a local prostitute, Maria, the townspeople take over the abandoned sets and re-enact the movie as a religious rite, this time with real violence instead of stunts. As the fervour surrounding the ceremonial movie *La Ultima Pelicula* grows, Kansas joins his friend, Vietnam veteran Neville Robey, in trying to find start-up capital to exploit a gold mine. Robey commits suicide after failing to

raise funds from a wealthy American businessman, Mr Anderson, whose wife becomes infatuated with Kansas. The local Catholic priest, fearing the locals have neglected the church for *La Ultima Pelicula*, asks for Kansas's help in explaining to the natives the difference between real and artificial violence. The priest eventually joins the obsession with the movie, which becomes the finale of Easter celebrations, with Kansas chosen to play the part of Billy/Christ, supposedly to be sacrificed. The film ends with Kansas repeatedly throwing himself on the ground, performing several 'takes' of Billy's death, before sticking his tongue out to the camera, dusting himself off and walking out of shot.

From the film's title alone one can infer Hopper is working in an apocalyptic mode, predicting the ultimate demise of Hollywood and America more broadly with the eschatological overtone of *The Last Supper*.⁶⁸ The anticipation of the end of cinema was fairly widespread towards the end of the sixties. Godard's black satire about the French bourgeoisie *Weekend* (1967) finished with the letters of the end credits being removed to spell '*fin de cinema*', while Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* (1971) mourned classic Hollywood with the closure of a cinema in a small Texan town, with *Red River* its swansong. To this sense of the imminent death of classic Hollywood, *The Last Movie* adds the damning realisation of cinema as an agent of American cultural imperialism and destructively violent force, and an awareness of the emptiness of the American Dream cinema promotes.

To those who saw the film on its brief theatrical release in September 1971, however, the film's title only apocryphally spelt the end of Dennis Hopper's career as a director and the beginning of the end for the Hollywood Renaissance, as the film was roundly and outrageously panned. David Denby described the film as 'an endless, chaotic, suffocating, acid-soaked movie with moments of clarity and coherence that don't connect with each other.'⁶⁹ Andrew Sarris declared it a 'hateful experience' in *The Village Voice*.⁷⁰ Pauline Kael dismissed the film as exhaustingly self-indulgent in *The New Yorker*, stating 'Hopper may have the making of a movie (perhaps more than one), but he blew it in the editing room.'⁷¹ The film was hotly anticipated, with the scandal and gossip surrounding the film's shambolic, debauched, drug-fuelled production in Peru being fuelled by lavish features in *Rolling Stone* and *Life* magazines. Despite breaking the box office record at New York's RKO 59th St. Twin Theatre and receiving a last-ditch saturation publicity campaign, the film died and was pulled

from the theatre after just a fortnight. The occasional revival notwithstanding, the film has largely gone unseen since; at the time of writing *The Last Movie* is unavailable online or on home video. Writing in defence of the film in *The New York Times*, Foster Hirsch observed that the film seemed ‘unlikely to speak directly or congenially to any particular audience.’⁷² Without the hooks of rock music and the freedom of the open road, Hopper had lost the *Easy Rider* audience, while the film’s non-linearity, playfulness and intellectual (over)ambitiousness exposed the prejudice of American critics against European art sensibilities being transposed onto American cinema.

The failure of *The Last Movie* evidences the limits of the Hollywood Renaissance as an auteur cinema, or the abortion of dreams of a New American Cinema or American Art film. *The Last Movie* was produced for Universal’s new youth division at the height of the Hollywood industrial crisis which saw studios temporarily hedging their bets on cheap independent productions and young talent. *The Last Movie* was budgeted at \$850,000, with Hopper sharing the risk but being granted total freedom and final cut (Biskind, 1998:136). In its attempted amalgam of personal underground filmmaking inspired by Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner and Andy Warhol, politically and socially engaged European art film, and Hollywood genre cinema, *The Last Movie* only illustrated the incompatibility of these filmmaking models in the world of commercially distributed entertainment.

The reputation of *The Last Movie* as an incoherent, disordered, drug-addled trip is largely undeserved. Formally, the film works within a kind of modernism in which theatrical, reflexive and aleatory modes are conflated and problematised, thereby denying the audience the ability to clearly register what James Naremore calls ‘the performance frame.’⁷³ The film might be best regarded as a meta-western, comprised of three discernable yet blurred narrative layers or films: the film-within-the-film that is the production of *Billy the Kid*, which we see both as fragments of a text and behind-the-scenes footage; the natives’ imitation of the film as religious rite, *La Ultima Pelicula*; and the modern western that is the story of Kansas, Maria, Robey and the Andersons. All three ‘films’ make up *The Last Movie* which might be regarded as the wider fourth film, as the film documents its own making, reflexively intruding into and sharing parallels with each of the other three westerns. Indeed, despite Hopper freely cutting between each narrative layer in a chronologically disruptive fashion, inserting collage-like snippets of sound or single shots from each layer in an expressive fashion,

deploying an array of playful early-Godardian distancing devices (a “scene missing” card during an evidently complete scene, boom-microphones intruding into the frame, and various allusions to Hollywood films and stars), and collapsing all three layers together during the finale, the plot of the film is easily discerned. Indeed, there is nothing as abstract or intentionally ‘trippy’ as the Mardis Gras sequence in *Easy Rider* and the long middle section of the film involving the Andersons is ostensibly linear and classical. As each of the three films that constitute *The Last Movie* establishes a different perspective on the western and thereby on notions of authenticity, it is worth considering each separately.

After the opening sequence of a bloodied Kansas being led through a fiesta procession towards the movie set, where Maria is auditioning for a role, the Priest explains to Kansas that he hopes to show that “the same morality that exists in the real church can exist in the movie church,” hoping that “morality can be born again.” Hopper then cuts, ironically, to the first shot of the movie that inspired the fiesta, *Billy the Kid*, which begins with a close up of a woman hitching up her skirt and dancing to an incomprehensible folk song in a crude set of western saloon. *Billy the Kid* is shown in a fragmented form that precludes any clear understanding of the narrative or any character identification, resembling rough un-colourbalanced rushes. Comprised of amateurish and gratuitous pyrotechnics, unconvincing stunts, ludicrously overacted deaths, laboured stabs at profundity, and above all, seemingly unmotivated violence, *Billy the Kid* is a straightforward parody of the western. The disorientating gunfight in the town square plays like an incompetent imitation of the opening of *The Wild Bunch*, with fake-looking blood flying, gunmen cartwheeling off sets, agonised deaths and slow-motion stunts – there is perhaps even a deliberate allusion to the finale of Peckinpah’s film as one of the gang wheels around and shoots a woman cradling Billy’s body, shouting “bitch!” *Billy the Kid* makes a mockery of the Priest’s hope that “morality can be born again” through imitating movies; far from a vehicle for American ideals or political philosophy, the western is exposed as an artless and banal spectacle of violence.

Hopper exposes the mundanity of commercial film production in the behind-the-scenes sequences, with cameras on tracks being pulled through thick mud, arguments about continuity and botched takes. Sam Fuller, gamely playing himself, is a caricature of a cigar-chewing, macho,

workmanlike director. The only direction he offers aside from demands for “more exuberance”, comes as he personally shoots Billy with a pistol in the final shot before the film wraps. “When I squeeze off a couple of shots at you, you take it and hit it hard – I want balls when you die,” he says before firing the pistol and thanking the crew for persevering in the “damn rugged location,” drawing a rather obvious parallel between shooting film/bullets and raising the question of moviemaking as an inherently violent macho fantasy. Tellingly, Hopper originally wanted Henry Hathaway and John Wayne (fancifully) to play the director and star of *Billy the Kid*, in what would have surely made a mockery of Wayne’s supposed embodiment of American Authenticity.

The straightforward parodic repudiation of the western in *Billy the Kid* is developed into a more complex critique of the effects of U.S. cultural imperialism on the introduction of the second film, *La Ultima Pelicula*. After the production returns to Hollywood, innocent of the disruption they have brought to the town, the natives begin ritualistically re-enacting the film on the leftover sets at night. With *Billy the Kid*, Hopper makes the point that there is no value in Hollywood filmmaking practice beyond producing a marketable product, but for the natives imitating the production there is no product, only performance. Replacing cameras and microphones with oversized wicker replicas, electric lights with primitive flaming torches, and special effects with fireworks, the natives transform commercial filmmaking into a celebratory pseudo-religious social ritual. Kansas tries to convince the ‘director’ not to use real violence, saying “we don’t do that in the movies – we fake everything. It’s all phony.” The natives, however, have no interest in fake violence; *La Ultima Pelicula* is not theatre, but rather an embrace of movies and their violent rituals as something real and present, stripped of the artifice of commodity production.

The point that Hollywood is fundamentally inauthentic, standing for an inherently violent American culture blundering into foreign lands is obvious. However, the natives are not the victims of American cultural imperialism one might expect, nor do they abandon their own culture and traditions in favour of Hollywood. While apocalyptic aesthetically, *La Ultima Pelicula* integrates and appropriates the rituals and symbols of Hollywood into an existing Christian festival, already mixed with Incan traditions. The image of sculptor carving a statue of a conquistador in the town square suggests that Hollywood is simply the latest iteration in a long lineage of conquest and appropriation.

As David E. James argues, the natives' practice of cinema, is thus 'the absence of a revolutionary film, the negation that constitutes a revolutionary cinema' and therefore a form of resistance to imperialism:

The appropriation of the sets is a symbolic liberation from imperialism, just as their possession of cinema, of the western, is a rejection of what *The Last Movie* has shown to be both typical of and metaphorical for contemporary exploitation of all kinds [...] Kansas is sacrificed in the exorcism of imperialism, while the art form of his culture finds both its purgation and a model of its transcendence (1989:301).

More meaningfully than any western of the Hollywood Renaissance, *La Ultima Pelicula* can be defined as an anti-western, though we cannot experience it directly for it is entirely ephemeral and subsumed within Hopper's *The Last Movie*. Together, *Billy the Kid* and *La Ultima Pelicula* constitute a sober refutation of the western as a "phony," exploitative agent of cultural imperialism, redeemable only by revolutionary appropriation that would require the absence of film itself. In the third film, the story of Kansas – in a sense the diegetic core of *The Last Movie* from which the other films develop – this critique is both supported and contradicted.

As his name suggests, Kansas functions partly as a national allegory. "He's Mr. Middle America," Hopper explained, comparing him to John Wayne as "naïve, innocent, blindly American, a guy with preconceived ideas about everything" and the embodiment of the corrupting effect of the American Dream (Winkler, 2011:139). James points out that Kansas operates as a mediator between various other characters, his quintessentially American image inspiring them to pursue their dreams and desires, namely wealth and sex, which are in turn revealed to be born out the influence of Hollywood (1983:38): Maria demands consumer goods like a refrigerator and a fur coat ("just because we don't have running water and electricity doesn't mean we don't like nice things, gringo"), Mr Anderson uses Kansas as a way into exploring the Chichero's seedy sex shows, Mrs Anderson has sexual fantasies about Kansas because of his cowboy image, and Robey's half-baked gold mining ambitions are based solely on his memory of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948). Kansas joins Robey in his doomed venture, becomes increasingly abusive towards Maria, and becomes the sacrificial scapegoat for his culture.

However, despite his functioning as a national allegory as part of the film's wider critique of Hollywood and cultural imperialism, Kansas is also the locus of a renewed desire for western authenticity. A representative figure on the one hand, Kansas is also an outsider, a peripheral figure in the film production, a wandering cowboy. His alienation from America and Hollywood are suggested in a carefully orchestrated sequence shot during a party held at Kansas's house. Looking pensive and faintly sickened, Kansas stands apart from the crowd in his suit and cowboy hat and gazes out into the darkness, framed through the bars of a window (Fig.16). The camera tracks along the outside of the house, following Kansas as he makes his way outside, revealing three separate rooms in the party, each satirising some aspect of the American crew. In the first, a large group gather around a table for an earnest sing-along of Waylon Jennings's 'My God and I,' in the second a woman strips on a table to a bashed-out honky-tonk piano, and in the third poncho-wearing hippies ludicrously freak out to the chanting of a native man ringing a bell. Kansas retreats outside, only his face visible against the darkness and spontaneously breaks down in tears. Seemingly overwhelmed by the cumulative effect of the three vignettes that Hopper connects, through the long take, into a microcosm of America, the scene succinctly conveys and elicits identification with Kansas's alienation from the culture which he is nonetheless unwittingly helping to export.

In the brief interludes when Kansas explores the verdant mountainous landscape alone or with Maria, *The Last Movie* entertains the possibility of discovering western authenticity on foreign soil. These sequences are distinguished aesthetically from the rest of the film, with the saturated colours of László Kovács's cinematography bringing out the vibrancy of nature and sense of hypoxic luminescence, starkly opposed to the grimy look of *Billy the Kid* or the crowded and frenetic compositions of *La Ultima Pelicula*. This contrast is particularly apparent as Hopper cuts from the chaotic shoot-out of *Billy the Kid*, to a long shot of Kansas riding across a field of bright yellow wildflowers accompanied by Kris Kristofferson's wistful ballad 'Me and Bobby McGee,' the camera zooming to a close-up on the flowers as if distracted by small details of nature. Elsewhere, Kansas and Maria are shown frolicking through long grass against a spectacular mountain backdrop, riding through rocky steppes above the clouds and making love at the base of a waterfall. In his recent appraisal of *The Last Movie*, J. Hoberman suggests that these 'Easy Rider'-style lyrical interludes,

hilariously punctuated by close-ups of flowers and scored to insipid folk rock' are ironic and filtered through Kansas's consciousness.⁷⁴ Sincerity is difficult to gauge as it can only register in dialogue with a sympathetic spectator, but while the nature sequences of *The Last Movie* might wobble towards cliché, appearing excessively romantic, there can be no doubting their relative sincerity compared to, for example, the parodic mode of *Billy the Kid*, or the satire of scenes with the Andersons (Fig. 17).

As Kansas and Maria discuss their future together midway through the film, gazing up at the trickling waterfall and framed together in a two-shot, Hopper effectively articulates the problem of reclaiming American Authenticity outside the United States. "This is the life – this is nice and simple. Just give me an adobe up on those rocks and I'd be a very happy man," Kansas enthuses genuinely. However, just as these Thoreauvean sentiments are aired, Maria – already envious of the Hollywood lifestyle – asks if they can have a swimming pool. Kansas initially rebuffs her, asking why she needs a swimming pool given their surroundings, but his mind soon wanders and he begins to speculate aloud about buying up land, building hotels, airstrips, cable-cars, and even ski slopes.

The tragedy of America, according to Hopper, is that its most admirable ideals are seemingly inseparable from its inherent destructiveness. *The Last Movie* fleetingly embraces the idea of rediscovering an untarnished western authenticity, a dream of America far from the United States, by retreating from society altogether. In this sense the film anticipates the retreat from a political conception of authenticity that increasingly marked westerns throughout the seventies. But, in the film's apocalyptic view of American culture, this fantasy of primitive retreat and stepping outside the influence of ideology altogether is bound to fail, as it is itself simply another manifestation of the ideology it professes to abjure. As Hollywood is squarely blamed in Hopper's film for generating these corrupt dreams, *The Last Movie* is forced to reject the form it inhabits. As the various western narratives within the film collapse into one another, *The Last Movie* finally embodies the processes and ideology it sets out to critique; in its failure to find an alternative, the film closes around itself, standing as the ultimate statement of disaffection with America, Hollywood and the western. Yet, as is proved consistently by even the most critical and politically engaged westerns of the Hollywood Renaissance, an insistent and overwhelming disaffection with America belies a lingering attraction; the western is conceived at once as the problem and the solution.



Fig. 5: John Wayne intimidates Dennis Hopper. *True Grit* (1969)



Fig. 6: *Easy Rider* (1969)



Fig. 7: *Ride The High Country* (1962)

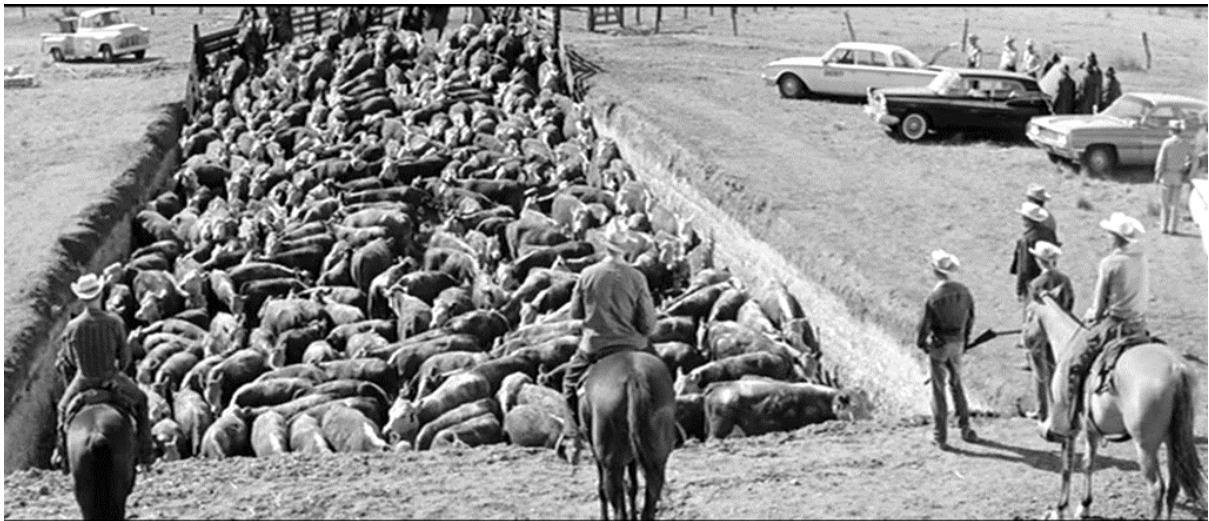


Fig. 8: *Hud* (1963)



Fig. 9: *Lonely Are The Brave* (1962)



Fig. 10: “The West won by its pioneers, settlers and adventurers is long gone now...” *How The West Was Won* (1962)



Fig. 11: “...from soil enriched from their blood, out of their fever to explore and build came lakes where once were burning deserts, came the good of the earth...” *How The West Was Won* (1962)

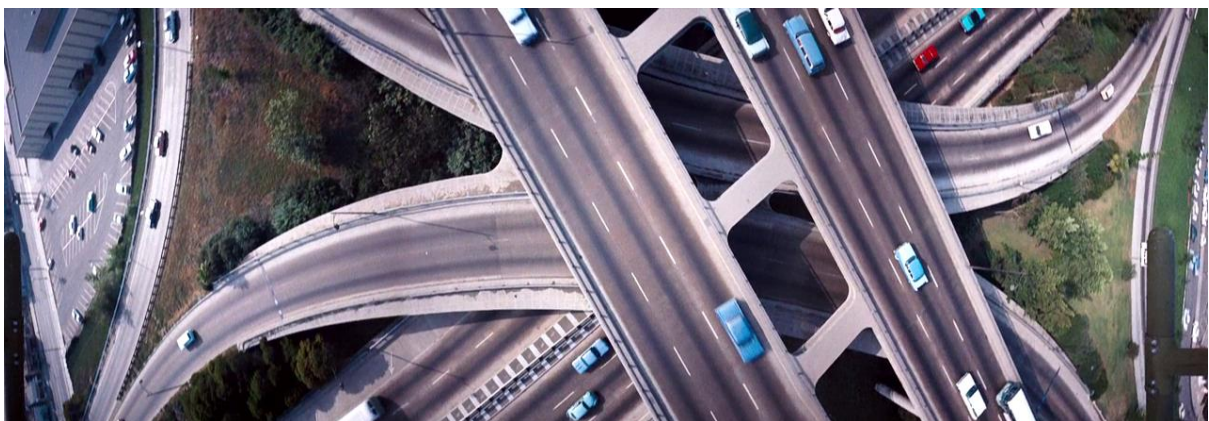


Fig. 12: “...came cities to rank among the great ones of the world, all the heritage of a people free to dream, free to act, free to mould their own destiny.” *How The West Was Won* (1962)



Fig. 13: *The Wild Bunch* (1969)



Fig. 14: "Let's go." *The Wild Bunch* (1969)



Fig. 15: "We all want to be children again, even the worst of us – perhaps the worst of us most of all." *The Wild Bunch* (1969)



Fig. 16: *The Last Movie* (1971)



Fig. 17: *The Last Movie* (1971)

Chapter Three:

Goin' Back: Spaces and Archetypes of Retreat

We grow impatient of so public a life and planet, and run hither and thither for nooks and secrets. The imagination delights in the wood-craft of Indians, trappers, and bee hunters. We fancy that we are strangers, and not so intimately domesticated in the planet as the Wild Man, and the wild beast and bird – Emerson, 'Experience' (1995:211).

He felt that wherever he lived, and wherever he would live hereafter, he was leaving the city more and more, withdrawing into the wilderness. He felt that was the central meaning he could find in all his life, and it seemed to him then that all the events of his childhood and his youth had led him unknowingly to this moment upon which he poised, as if before flight. He looked at the river again. On this side is the city, he thought, and on that the wilderness; and though I must return, even that return is only another means I have of leaving it, more and more – John Williams, *Butcher's Crossing* (1960) (2014:52).

Wilderness and the Counterculture

In the passage above the young protagonist Will Andrews, dissatisfied with academic life at Harvard and the crowded smoky streets of industrial Boston, considers the wilderness beyond from the limits of a small frontier camp town. Paraphrasing Thoreau's famous essay 'Walking' and adding undisguised references to the teachings of one 'Mr Emerson', Williams places his own and the character Andrews's attraction to the untamed West firmly within the tradition of American transcendentalism. Andrews joins two other men on a daring buffalo hunt in remote Colorado, not for sport or profit, but rather in pursuit of some inexpressible feeling he describes as at once 'a freedom and goodness, a hope and a vigour,' and a return to the 'source and preserver of the world' in 'wildness' (2014:18).⁷⁵ Over the course of the novel Williams explores the contradictions of these

unmitigated transcendentalist dreams, as Andrews is forced to endure the unforgiving hardship, the banality and the violence of wilderness survival. After surviving a bitter winter in the mountains, Andrews returns to Butcher's Crossing, hardened and stripped of his restrictive urban manners, but without the meaningfulness or sense of being he hoped to find in the wilderness. Back in civilization, in the short time that has passed, history has moved on, the town near deserted after the market for buffalo hide has collapsed with changes in fashion, and Andrews is left not knowing where to go next.

In registering the appeal of anti-social, navel-gazing retreat from responsibility, from compromise, and from the hopeless corruption of urban modernity into wilderness – even with awareness of the inevitable failure of such a retreat – Williams's novel effectively anticipates the dilemma facing those invested in the possibility of realising American Authenticity in the late sixties and early seventies. With the optimistic existential politics of the mid-sixties already disappearing into a different epoch, severed from the present by America's 'most turbulent year' in 1968 (Patterson, 1996:178), and with a host of new frustrating developments – the dispiriting unfolding defeat in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal and the decay of the American economy – during the early 1970s unfolded, hopes for genuine change waned and the energy and momentum of the sixties dispersed.⁷⁶ The long postwar economic boom, upon which even the radical movements of the sixties depended for confidence and security, finally gave way to high rates of inflation, rising unemployment and negligible growth. Not since the Great Depression, Bruce Schulman writes, had 'talk of limits and diminishing expectations filled presidential addresses and dinner table conversations' (2002:8). While the sixties and the seventies tend to elide in the imagination, with much meta-historical debate expended on drawing the margins between the two epochs in order to accommodate significant events, the key difference is found in a shift in cultural tenor in response to these events; from hope to pessimism, commitment to confusion, and movement to stagnation, the early 1970s saw the subtle atrophy of all the forces that had defined the tumultuous peaks of the 1960s. Reflecting on the aftermath of the radical sixties, Todd Gitlin writes that, 'imperceptibly the sixties slid into the seventies and the zeitgeist settled down' (1987:423). With the demise of the New Left as a powerful force in national politics came the decline in utopian thinking and with it the desire to transcend alienation and achieve authenticity. The political energies of the sixties dispersed into a number of

single-issue movements, as the abstract goal of authenticity was substituted for concrete gains in the political representation and liberation of women, homosexuals, and ethnic and racial minorities.⁷⁷

In the seventies authenticity inarguably ceased to be the keystone of any coherent political movement, but the concept held its currency in the popular counterculture. The ideologically vague sixties counterculture of ‘turn on, tune in, and drop out’ was relatively immune to the series of events that frustrated the New Left, persisting in diverse forms well into the 1970s, despite the dark chapters of the Manson murders and Altamont. Indeed, the counterculture’s emphasis on self-actualisation, expanding consciousness, and doing one’s ‘own thing’, usually in the form of primitive retreat from modern society, meant that authenticity not only remained a core goal, it was now detached from the prohibitively vast and seemingly impossible task of achieving an authentic society. This inward turning conception of authenticity became increasingly widespread through a melange of hippie philosophies and New Age spiritual practices and therapies, all offering sanctuary from the perplexing aftermath of historical events.⁷⁸ Tom Wolfe memorably labelled the spread of these practices ‘The Me-Decade’ in a 1976 feature for *New York* magazine (not entirely coincidentally, the same issue carried the headline ‘Real Cowboy Gear: New Sexy Fashion’ on its cover), describing this mass spiritual awakening as a ‘new alchemical dream’: ‘changing one’s personality—remaking, remodeling, elevating, and polishing one’s very *self* . . . and observing, studying, and doting on it.’⁷⁹ Where Thoreau and successive generations of Americans had emphasised the importance of discovering one’s true self and acting according to it – to borrow Wolfe’s metallurgic analogy, as if extracting some precious indivisible element from the extraneous surrounding ore – the seventies popularised an alchemical conception of the self as being conjured and improved by the individual, not as means to authentic action, but as an end in itself.

The increasingly inward-looking counterculture and the remnants of radical political movements in the early seventies are linked by their shared interest in protecting the environment and rediscovering America’s remaining wilderness. After the collapse of a revolutionary movement, ecological and environmental causes offered a political arena where objective gains could be made, a growing public interest could be called upon, and social causes could be contained. Roderick Nash argues that throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, wilderness had become an important subject to

an unprecedented number of Americans, tipping the traditional ambivalence towards nature in American culture decisively towards appreciation and conservation for the first time (1973:252). The mass demonstrations across the nation to mark the inaugural Earth Day in April 1970 marked the growing interest in environmentalism. Described by James Turner as an ‘aftershock of the broader social movements of the sixties,’ Earth Day typifies the way in which anti-establishment feeling and militant demands for social and cultural change were contained within the environmental movement (2009:128). However, the growth of wilderness appreciation was quickly adopted by mainstream politics, with environmental protection becoming an important issue in Nixon’s first term. The exponential increase in wilderness recreation as a part of 1970s consumer culture – which ironically posed new environmental problems – also detached wilderness appreciation and environmentalism from the radical or oppositional social and political movements from which it emerged.⁸⁰

The counterculture’s interest in wilderness is rather more straightforward: wilderness seemed the epitome of naturalness, the antithesis of alienating modern society, and the space in which a sense of self could be reclaimed. As Roderick Nash puts it, ‘in the proportion that civilization disappointed, wilderness appealed’ (1973:261) and with the escalating series of events that led the counterculture to resent the current state of the nation and abandon any hope for its future, the idea of wilderness filled a yawning absence and provided sanctuary. In a popular sociological snapshot of the counterculture, *The Greening of America*, published in 1970, Charles Reich described wilderness, along with freedom from technology and the ‘wholeness’ of the self as the movement’s foremost value: ‘Perhaps the deepest source of consciousness is nature. Members of the new generation seek out the beach, the woods and the mountains [...] they do not go to nature as a holiday from what is real. They go to nature as a source’ (1970:262). Similar sentiments were expressed by the poet Gary Snyder, once associated with the Beat generation, who contrasts suffocating urban life with haiku-like descriptions of nature and hopes for a communal living.⁸¹ Edward Abbey, a western environmentalist writer, recommended a more extreme form of wilderness retreat in *Desert Solitaire*, recounting his solitary experiences exploring the canyon country of Utah with its punishing heat and ancient natural sculptures: ‘that *out there* is a different world, older and greater and deeper than ours, a world which surrounds and sustains the little world of men as sea and sky surround and sustain a ship. The shock

of the real' (1968:45). Here the pursuit of authenticity acquires an emphasis on extreme solitude and a desire to return, not simply to an imagined point of balance in American history, but to return to pre-history, to conceive of the self in a wider natural sense, and to step outside of history altogether.

This chapter will explore the role of the western in the conception of a radically inward, anti-social, and anti-modern authenticity in the 1970s. As the political imperatives of authenticity in the late sixties were frustrated, a successive idea developed in its place, retaining the core concern with finding a solution to modern alienation, but jettisoning all hopes for this to be achieved outside of the consciousness of the individual or at best, a small like-minded group. The peak of the Hollywood Renaissance's critical engagement with the western expressed with anger, melancholy and disillusionment, the impossibility of achieving authenticity in a nation always already corrupted; in both *The Wild Bunch* and *The Last Movie*, this failure has near apocalyptic results. But as the turbulent years of the late sixties subsided, with neither apocalypse nor revolution forthcoming, and with diminished expectations and further frustrations in the place of a solution to pervasive inauthenticity, westerns begin to offer an answer to the unanswerable question posed by Dutch in *The Wild Bunch*: "Back off to what?" Westerns of the mid-to-late Hollywood Renaissance, this chapter will argue, are engaged in the process of backing off: going back, both temporally and spatially, to places outside of history, retreating into wilderness from society found utterly irredeemable, returning home, rediscovering lost innocence and turning inward in a privileging of the individual self over all other concerns. Westerns of the seventies evidence a lack of interest in resolving contradictions or restoring balance, foregoing the tentative balance of the genre's core antinomies of wilderness and civilization and skewing decisively in favour of the wild.

Belief in the value of American frontier communities collapsed and satirical representations of nascent modern towns abounded. In *Kid Blue* (1973), Bick, a mild-mannered and hapless outlaw (Dennis Hopper) fails in his modest ambition of eking a living in the booming town of Dimebox as he is picked upon by the draconian sheriff and exploited in a factory producing novelty ashtrays. The town is a caricature of 'straight' society, ruled by repressive social conventions and the mass production of pointless objects, and Bick eventually escapes back into the wilderness with the help of three Indians consigned to the town barn. A better known and equally unequivocal admonishment of

frontier civilization forms the basis for Clint Eastwood's directorial debut *High Plains Drifter* (1973). Playing The Stranger, a spectral drifter with no desire to inhabit civilization, Eastwood exposes the cowardice of the small lakeside town of Lago whose citizens have all borne witness to the brutal murder of their sheriff. After briefly unsettling the established social hierarchy, The Stranger very literally paints the town red and designates it Hell, beyond any redemption. As Edward Gallaent argues, 'the point is not that the people of Lago are particularly evil or corrupt, but that they are empty [...] the effect is less of a community destroyed than one of an illusion of a community exploded' (1994:119). Where *High Plains Drifter*, like *McCabe & Mrs Miller*, is limited to exposing the emptiness and lack of meaning in the kind of frontier communities at stake in classical westerns like *My Darling Clementine*, many westerns in the seventies explored alternatives through various forms of 'backing off'.

Peter Fonda's *The Hired Hand* (1971), financed along with *The Last Movie* by Ned Tanen's youth orientated unit at Universal after the success of *Easy Rider*, exemplifies and prefigures the inward turn of the seventies western.⁸² Fonda and Hopper's respective western projects in the wake of *Easy Rider* contrast starkly, befitting Wyatt and Billy's clashing personas in their collaboration: *The Last Movie* self-reflexively and critically explored the genre, deploying radical formal structures, appearing complex, contradictory and antagonistic; *The Hired Hand* comfortably inhabits the genre, telling a simple and straightforward story requiring little interpretation with a gentle elegiac tone. Though neither film was a commercial success, *The Hired Hand*, unlike *The Last Movie*, anticipates significant trends within the genre and resonates with the aforementioned transitions in American culture, where Hopper's film quickly dissolved into the ending its title declared; *The Last Movie* is a film of the sixties, *The Hired Hand* a film of seventies, their proximity and shared production context only illustrating the rapidity with which the zeitgeist had shifted.

The film opens with a series of long overlapping optical dissolves of a wide river sparkling with the pink and gold reflections of early morning light. In slow motion a silhouetted man frolics and splashes in the water, while another fishes on the bank. The figures are duplicated as further dissolves flow slowly into one another, creating a wash of colour and movement and making it appear that the fisherman has reeled the swimmer onto the shore. Cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond's embrace of

overlapping distortions of natural light and Bruce Langhorne's contemplative and delicate score, performed on a banjo and fiddle combine to create a timeless natural lyricism, a lackadaisical mood verging on the dreamlike or mildly stoned. Appropriately, Fonda has described *The Hired Hand* as an attempt at creating a 'symphony' of man's discovery and relation to the elements using the western as 'the Greek drama of America.'⁸³ The opening sequence immediately differentiates the film from the vogue for historical revisionism and contemporary social and political allegory, although the emphasis on historical verisimilitude throughout the film should be noted.

Around a campfire we are introduced to three drifters, long-time companions Harry (Peter Fonda) and Arch (Warren Oates), and the younger Dan (Robert Pratt), as they fantasise about reaching California. Dan's reverie about the riches of weather, women, gold, oranges and ocean waiting on the West coast is interrupted as he finds the body of a young girl snagged on the fishing line. Harry cuts the line free in slow motion from a low-angle, emphasising not the body (which is only shown briefly during a dissolve at the end of the scene), but the act of letting it go; a potential inciting incident, or alternative narrative trajectory, one in which the three men identify and seek justice for the girl out of a sense of moral duty, is thereby refused. After Dan makes a half-hearted attempt to retrieve the body, Harry pushes him back, saying, "She'd come to pieces in your hand the moment you try to pull her in." The line, more than simply a grisly observation about the decomposition of a water-logged corpse, takes on a wider significance throughout the film, as a mark of diminished expectations and the disillusioned acceptance of compromise. As the body drifts downstream another series of long optical dissolves of the three men riding across a blue gauzy blend of river and arid landscape indicates a pivotal realisation or transition has taken place, as the group ride – or flow – into a border village (Fig. 18).

Upon entering the desolate and lifeless village, comprised of a few crumbling shacks and populated only by a gang of unwelcoming thugs and a suspicious bartender, the two older men realise they have visited before, as if to confirm the failure of their transient lifestyle (Fonda has suggested the village was conceptualised as a kind of purgatory).⁸⁴ Weary from years of aimless wandering that have brought him back to the same lifeless village, and spurred somehow by the grim discovery on the bank of the Rio Grande, Harry decides to return to the estranged wife and child he abandoned

seven years ago. Poised in limbo between the idealised vision of a future in California espoused by Dan he knows all too well to be unrealisable, and a past he scarcely remembers, Harry opts to go back – both spatially and temporally – to rediscover the home and domestic life sacrificed to join Arch. (A similar trajectory underlies *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), in which Josey (Eastwood), having witnessed the murder of his family and the destruction of his small farm at the hands of Jayhawkers in the Civil War, reluctantly gathers and bonds together a surrogate family of various outsiders as they retreat from the warring states and modern technology to an idyllic fortress-like farm on the Mexican border).⁸⁵ Arch cautions him against such a return asking “what if there’s nothing there?” but Harry replies simply, “home is just a place you start from.” *The Hired Hand* proceeds to test the feasibility of rebuilding an abandoned home and a meaningful existence through nostalgic retreat and out of disillusionment with the present and all hope for the future.

The number of years that Harry attempts to roll back is potentially significant in itself. Seven years have passed since Harry left his wife, ten years his senior, when he was just twenty years old. Prematurely aged by the hardship of the intervening years, Harry’s journey to rebuild his abandoned home is also an attempt to reclaim his youth. Lost innocence, nostalgia for a recent past unappreciated at the time, and the desire to undo or forget recent trauma were potent themes in the aftermath of the late-sixties. For instance, in its evocation of the youth cultures of early rock n roll, high school dances and street cruising in hot-rodded cars, *American Graffiti* (1973) implicitly associated the coming of age of baby-boom youths with the imminent loss of the supposed innocence of the nation in 1962, encouraging a collective nostalgia for these already-mythologised lost years, whether directly experienced or not. Though much less overt due to its non-specific late nineteenth century setting, *The Hired Hand* similarly indulges in nostalgia for a recent past rendered irretrievable by the trauma of recent events; Harry’s seven years spent fruitlessly drifting correlate in a contemporary context with the years of assassinations, escalating war, and economic collapse. The home abandoned seven years prior might be understood as America of the early sixties seen from the suddenly dizzying perspective of the early seventies; the milieu once refused as staid and repressive becomes imbued with youthful possibility, offering amnesic refuge and renewed hope.

As in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, the death of an idealistic young companion provides the final motivation for retreat. Dan is murdered for his horse, set up by the village kingpin McVey and his Mexican concubine, as if to confirm the inhospitableness and arbitrary cruelty of present-day society. As the pair bury Dan's body, Arch reads a passage from the Gospel According to Thomas (a non-canonical gospel of sayings discovered in 1945 emphasising individual enlightenment over ritual or sacrifice, also referenced in *The Last Movie*), ending with "the kingdom of the father is spread on the earth and men do not see it," unwittingly commenting on the pair's attempts to retreat from social and historical realities into another dimension, and perhaps, the inevitable failure of such a retreat. The long journey home is expressed in another series of long dissolves of the three horses, one now without rider, silhouetted against shimmering sunsets shot with a long lens, as twilight skies fade into vast sand dunes. The landscape gradually shifts from the arid and inhospitable Southwest to a pastoral heartland of lakes and forests, occasionally marked with signs of agriculture, suggesting the journey home is also one that reverses the thrust of westward expansion.

The pair finally arrive at the family farm in a slow tracking shot, the mood of the score audibly lightened; located in a leafy copse carpeted with wildflowers, the air glistening with pollen illuminated by 'magic hour' light, the riders glide towards a farmhouse led by Harry's daughter. However, despite the unabashed romanticism of the setting, re-entering this domestic idyll is far from straightforward: Harry's wife Hannah barely recognises him and reluctantly allows him to sleep in the barn, their daughter Janey believes her father is dead, Hannah frankly admits to having had sexual relationships with hired farm workers in his absence, and Harry is eventually forced to accept that re-establishing himself as a husband, father, and farmer will mean abandoning Arch and the platonic ideal of male companionship and constant motion that first lured him away. Yet, there is a point, as Harry and Arch are both employed by Hannah to fix the farm and made to sleep in the barn – thus retaining some aspects of their transient lifestyle while on the threshold of domesticity – that a temporary equilibrium is achieved. Images of honest labour – fixing a windmill, changing the wheel of a wagon, or digging a well – spent reconstructing and making sustainable the family farm, effectively insulating it from the corrosive society outside, briefly substantiates Harry's retreat

through meaningful work. Yet, the pursuit of authenticity – even in this modest form – as ever, is a tragic narrative.

Learning that Arch has been taken hostage by McVey in the purgatorial village, Harry leaves the farm to rescue him, fulfilling Hannah's suspicion about him leaving, and dies saving him. On final analysis Harry's line on the riverbank in the opening sequence about things coming to pieces the moment one tries to pull them in prophesies the inevitable failure of the nostalgic retreat the film simultaneously endorses and aestheticises. There can be no going back, but in the absence of any hope for a meaningful future, *The Hired Hand* eulogises a striving and sympathises with an ongoing American dilemma: that which Emerson described as 'the most unhandsome part of our condition' in his essay 'Experience', the '[...] evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers when we clutch hardest' (1995:204). It is this peculiarly American *hamartia*, the pursuit of the unapproachable, and revelry in inevitable failure, that offers a key to understanding the western in the seventies.

In the previous chapter I argued that the Hollywood Renaissance period saw an unprecedented plurality of western production as the result of industrial instability, generational conflict and declining censorship. The western had never been a monolithic entity, but in the early seventies in particular, its heterogeneity is unmatched in the history of the genre. Nonetheless, the remainder of this chapter will reveal an overarching narrative, common thread and structure of feeling connecting two distinct sub-genres – defined by their foregrounding of character types traditionally marginalised in supporting roles as protagonists – which, in turn, help explain the relation of the genre as a whole to wider American culture and society. Both the Mountain Man and the Hippie Indian express the same contradictory sense of going back introduced in *The Hired Hand* and together constitute important vectors in an increasingly depoliticised, inward looking and wilderness obsessed notion of American Authenticity that helped bring the western to an impasse by the end of the decade.

“I Hear There’s Land There a Man has Never Seen”: The Contradictions of the Mountain Man

It is an odd jealousy: but the poet finds himself not near enough to his object. The pine-tree, the river, the bank of flowers before him, does not seem to be nature. Nature is still elsewhere – Emerson, ‘Nature’ (1995:271).

[...] in the ‘real’ wilderness, we deny categorically that men, and their works that we leave behind, are a part of nature. The more we run back to nature, the more we run from it – Andrew Abbott, ‘Fleeing Wilderness’ (1977:75).

It is commonplace to acknowledge that the cowboy hero has served as the image of the Wild West, as the embodiment of American myth, primarily because of his immediately recognisable identification with an essential conflict, described in a late essay by historian Eric Hobsbawm: ‘The original image of the Wild West, I suggest contains two elements: the confrontation of nature and civilization, and of freedom with social constraint’ (2013:278). The versatility of the cowboy hero derives from his being representative of this conflict, a figure balanced between two poles of an historical dialectic that will lead to his obsolescence (thus acquiring a romantic tragic quality). His appearance contains both elements of nature and civilization and demonstrates his ability to move between two worlds. While confidently baring the effects of living outdoors in harsh conditions, the cowboy also values the comforts of the town – a bath and a clean shave will typically be his first objectives on returning to civilization – and his clothes, though practical, suited to working with animals and rarely changed, are not without fashionable adornments – fringed chaps, decorative spurs, patterned boots – whether historical or contemporary. It is estimated that only 35,000 men worked on cattle trails, mainly running north from Texas, in a relatively brief period from 1868-1895, yet the cowboy remains the ubiquitous and quintessential image of the Wild West.⁸⁶ His marginal historical role and anonymity make the cowboy a highly adaptable vessel for ideals, ‘an effective vehicle for dreaming’ as Hobsbawm puts it (2013:289), in any period.

Though not supplanted as the dominant western hero in the seventies – especially if one includes the outlaw as a variety of the cowboy archetype – the cowboy is joined by the contrasting and hitherto marginal figure of the Mountain Man, who becomes a regular feature for the first time. During the genre’s heyday in the fifties, only fourteen films feature mountain men, falling to just five in the sixties before rising dramatically to twenty-two in the seventies. The Mountain Man joins the various other disaffected outsider figures of the Hollywood Renaissance, featuring in as many westerns from 1967-1980 as in nearly the entire history of the genre to that point, from the late silent era to the late sixties.⁸⁷ What is more, films such as *The Way West* (1967), *The Scalphunters* (1968), *Man in the Wilderness* (1971), *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972) and *The Mountain Men* (1980) promote the figure of the Mountain Man from his absurd or comic supporting roles to a sympathetic and identifiable protagonist.

As a western hero the Mountain Man is a cowboy of unfettered id, the precarious balance between nature and civilization having been tipped decisively towards a state of near absolute wildness, solitude and animality. Typically dressed in whole animal hides and furs, his features obscured by a thick beard and unkempt hair, the Mountain Man’s appearance is shaped by and suited for the wilderness, eschewing all the qualities which make traditional cowboy stars attractive; far from the smart ruggedness of Gary Cooper or John Wayne, the Mountain Man lets it all hang out. In his appearance the Mountain Man bears the signs of his organic lifestyle, an aesthetic shared with a significant proportion of the hippie counterculture, who similarly rejected the supposed conformity of fastidious grooming and manufactured attire.

Originating from an earlier period in the history of the American West, the Mountain Man figure was popularised through accounts of the adventures of trappers and hunters who predominantly lived alone, exploring the Rockies and far Northwest in pre-Civil War America and representing some of the earliest intrusions of white Anglo-Americans into the unsettled regions of the continent. By the time of the cowboy, the Mountain Man myth had already consolidated around individuals like Jim Bridger, John Colter, Kit Carson, John “Liver-Eating” Johnson, and Jedediah Smith. From the earliest fictional representation in Timothy Flint’s *Shoshonee Valley* in 1830, the Mountain Man, often incarnated as Kit Carson, became the hero of dime novels into the twentieth century, along with the

occasional studio western like *Across the Wide Missouri* (1951) and *The Big Sky* (1952) before a more significant and concentrated revival during the Hollywood Renaissance (Buscombe, 1988:192).

In order to explain the appeal and function of the Mountain Man in the early seventies it is instructive to view the archetype as an American variant of the ancient cultural tradition of the part human, part animal Wild Man. Hayden White argues that the role of the Wild Man, from biblical times to the Middle Ages, has been – much like the idea of madness in Foucault's famous study – to assert, especially in times of sociocultural stress, a sense of civilised humanity by characterising its dialectical antithesis (1978:151). Thus, the Wild Man, as the fearful embodiment of 'wildness,' 'madness' and 'heresy' serves to affirm qualities of 'civility,' 'sanity,' and 'orthodoxy' without the need for concrete evidence or definition. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the triumph of technological modern civilization, the rhetoric of the Wild Man reverses, characterised instead like the Noble Savage, as a model of uncorrupted freedom and a vehicle for criticism of the effects of civilization. As White explains, with the gradual demise of various wildernesses, the fantasies and anxieties of civilization projected onto the Wild Man were increasingly interiorised:

As one after another of these wildernesses was brought under control, the idea of the Wild Man was progressively despatialised. This despatialization was attended by a compensatory process of psychic interiorization. And the result has been that modern cultural anthropology has conceptualized the idea of wildness as the repressed content of *both* civilized *and* primitive humanity. So that, instead of the relatively comforting thought that the Wild Man may exist *out there*, and can be contained by some kind of physical action, it is now thought [...] that the Wild Man is lurking within every man, is clamouring for release within us all, and will be denied only at the cost of life itself (1978:154).

This is the key difference between the Wild Man and the Noble Savage: whereas the noble savage is normally conceived as a primitive Other, subjugated or bound for extermination, the Wild Man is conceived as being a part of "*us*" (as in white European or American), that which Rousseau first wrote about lying beneath the residue and drapery of civilization. As Peter Thorslev writes: 'The Wild Man has come to stand as a symbol, not only for what we have lost in becoming civilized but also for what we have repressed' (1972:298). The figure of the Mountain Man is a distinctively American

version of the Wild Man myth, which crucially, and unlike its European forbearers, is lent a sense of possibility by its association with verifiable historical individuals and, at least in the early nineteenth century, substantial unmapped wilderness spaces. But like all Wild Man creations, the Mountain Man exists predominantly to convey an attitude towards the civilization of which he is an antithesis. In contrast to the cowboy hero, whose authenticity lies in embodying a moment of conflict, balance or transition, the Mountain Man is defined by extremity and refusal; the politics of the Mountain Man consist only of negation.

Man in the Wilderness (1971) and *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972) together effectively demonstrate the role of the Mountain Man in American culture of the early seventies for both epitomise the contemporary appeal of the figure, yet ultimately adopt a revealing difference in point-of-view. *Man in the Wilderness*, directed by Richard C. Sarafian (otherwise known principally for *Vanishing Point* (1971), an existentially-inflected countercultural road movie about the pursuit of speed in the American Southwest, clearly indebted to *Easy Rider*) is an overt and heavily symbolic endorsement of primitive survival in wilderness. Richard Harris as Zach Bass, a member of a hunting expedition returning from the far northwest in 1820, is abandoned by his party after suffering near-fatal wounds in a bear attack, and subsequently undergoes a physical and spiritual revival alone in the wilderness. Sydney Pollack's *Jeremiah Johnson*, comparatively epic in scope and vastly more successful commercially, grossing \$47 million over its lifetime – owing largely to the popularity of its star Robert Redford – with a roadshow release complete with grandiose overture and *entr'acte*, follows a young Union soldier who retreats from the Mexican War to pursue a life as a Mountain Man in the Rockies. John Milius's screenplay, based on Robert Bunker's *Crow Killer: The Saga of Liver-Eating Johnson* and Vardis Fisher's *Mountain Man*, focuses on Johnson's learning to survive in the wilderness, his interactions with other trappers, and the conflict with Crow Indians through which he becomes mythologised. Despite its straightforward subject matter, *Jeremiah Johnson* is decidedly more complex in its treatment of the Mountain Man than *Man in the Wilderness*: while stopping short of offering a critique of the American propensity for irresponsible and anti-social individualism, the film subtly explores the Mountain Man's key contradictions in a manner that opens up questions

about the continuing fascination with wilderness retreat in American culture, and precludes uncritical participation in such fantasies.

Man in the Wilderness opens with the absurd image of a ship, its mast resembling a crucifix, poking through a line of trees as it travels across a drab autumnal woodland landscape. Lumbering awkwardly across the terrain on spindly wheels, hauled by a long train of mules, the ship forms the film's central metaphor for American civilization. Modestly anticipating Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), which went considerably further in enacting the visionary pointlessness of transporting a ship over unyielding and hostile land, the ship of fools, led by Captain Henry (John Huston) and inhabited by a motley crew of desperate trappers, none too subtly figures as a deranged vessel of manifest destiny; the ship cuts a swathe through Indian territory, decked out with cannons to protect its valuable quarry of furs (Fig. 19). Midway through the film Captain Henry delivers a speech to the crew justifying his decision to leave Zach Bass to die, disguising his commercial motives with a nationalist rhetoric that recalls the lawyer's speech in *McCabe & Mrs Miller*: "Man is expendable. We are exploring new frontiers and must always push on and give our lives if need be. This is more than a trapping mission. We are here to explore the new America, dig into its pagan regions, and we can't afford to fail." Finally, most unconvincingly of all, he concludes: "Zach was like a son to me. I know he'd be proud of my decision." Though lacking the irony of the lawyer's manifest destiny spiel in Altman's film – for none of the crew evidently buy it, nor does Huston's dishevelled performance suggest he fully believes his own words – the speech performs a similar function, exposing the emptiness, even callousness, of imperatives to territorial and economic expansion.

For nearly the first half of the film the spectator is aligned spatially and epistemically with an immobile hero as Zach Bass is abandoned by the hunting party and left to bleed to death by a shallow grave. The camera is consistently placed low to the ground, immersing the spectator closely in the dirt, leaves and muddy water alongside Bass, focusing on his gruesome wounds and surveying the misty riverbank. Subjective point-of-view shots inserted in a non-linear fashion, emulating Bass's glassy, semi-conscious, and bloodshot perspective on the ship leaving, the two men debating whether to kill him, and the passing Indians who say a prayer over him, emphasise his helplessness. As Bass is roused by a scavenging wolf and rolls into the shallow water he begins the long process of recovering

from his injuries, surviving in the wild and gradually transitioning into a Mountain Man, that forms the basic plot of the film. At first, the film focuses on the smallest of actions – scooping water from the river, digging in the dirt for warmth, Bass dragging himself across the ground in search of food – shown mainly in close-up from a low angle, to demonstrate his reversion to the most basic of natural elements (at one point he is totally disguised by leaves but for his face), and to encourage a haptic phenomenology appealing to the spectator's sense of touch. Indeed, McCarthy points out that one of the features distinguishing the Mountain Man from the cowboy, making him less traditionally acceptable as a national hero is precisely this appeal to the senses, as he is driven purely by instinct and sensory immersion in the wilderness (1995:126). Subsequent phases in Bass's revival, as if imitating an evolutionary scale, have him crawl out of his primordial riverbank, fend off a pack of wolves to scavenge raw meat off a dying buffalo, start a fire with makeshift tools, and walk upright with splints setting his injuries, before finally arriving at the imagery of the Romantic Mountain Man: dressed in furs, decorated with antlers and evidently fully adapted to his environment as he assails a snow-covered peak (Fig. 20).

The narrative of Bass's transition from dying outcast of civilization to fully fledged Mountain Man via the trials of primitivistic wilderness survival is inflected throughout with a theme of spiritual revival that lends an otherwise broadly universal story a contemporary resonance. Prior to the bear attack, Bass appears resigned and disaffected, glumly trudging along with the hunting party. Three flashbacks triggered by lapses in consciousness as he lies dying on the riverbank reveal various traumatic events in his childhood and youth: all interior scenes, characterised by crowded slightly artificial compositions and dim lighting. In the first, Bass is shown as a young boy watching his mother's body being tied in a body bag, as an off camera voice confirms she died of the "sinner's disease," cholera. In the second, a schoolmaster berates the boy for not answering a question during a Bible quiz, whipping him and repeating "God made the world," an off-kilter cross prominently displayed on the wall linking this oppressive world, with fairly obvious symbolism, to the cross on the mast of the hunting ship (fanatical religious belief also functions as a signifier of oppression in Peckinpah, especially in *The Ride The High Country* and *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid*). Finally, an adult Bass is shown with his wife in a small cottage, apologising to his unborn child before his

departure to the West saying, “You’ve chosen to be born, I don’t know why, because it’s hell here on earth.” Bass’s depression, his total disillusionment with the world, is thereby succinctly – perhaps simplistically – diagnosed as a result of theological oppression and lack of maternal influence within the confines of a spatially restrictive American civilization. Born again through his wilderness trials, resurrected Lazarus-like as he pulls himself out of his shallow grave, Bass’s physical recovery is met by a corresponding spiritual rejuvenation as he sheds the pages of the token Bible left to him by the hunting party – employing its pages variously as insulation and kindling – as the maternal absence is filled by his newfound connection to nature and rediscovered purpose in attempting to find his son. Bass’s rebirth as a kindly Mountain Man is confirmed, with saccharine overstatement, as he shelters from a snowstorm with an injured rabbit, nursing it back to health to a swooning romantic score. From the remaining pages of his Bible he reads a verse from Job: “For there is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoot will not cease. Though its roots grow old in the earth, and its stump die in the ground.” This excessive emphasis on Bass’s rebirth and spiritual rejuvenation (in the form of vague deism) through temporary survival and solitude make him the quintessential New Age Mountain Man. *Man in the Wilderness* endorses the self-remaking benefits of a dose of wilderness for those vaguely dissatisfied with civilization.

Jeremiah’s retreat in *Jeremiah Johnson* is more authentic than Bass’s in *Man in the Wilderness* because he is not forced to become a Mountain Man out of necessity for survival, but rather opts for that lifestyle out of a sense of purpose and an implicit rejection of white civilization, recalling Roderick Nash’s remark about the wilderness appealing to the counterculture ‘in the proportion that civilization disappointed’ (1973:261). As Mick McAllister puts it, ‘Jeremiah Johnson is a romantic, fleeing civilization, a Thoreau-like spirit seeking the community of nature [...]’ whose retreat shares ‘unmistakable parallels with contemporary America’ (1978:39). Stepping off a barge rowed by Indians at a trading post, looking for supplies and directions to the Rockies, only Jeremiah’s Union cap offers a clue to what he is escaping from, while the narrator says “nobody knows where he came from and it don’t seem to matter much.” While total rejection of civilization “down there” appears to be Jeremiah’s motivation, war, specifically the Mexican War of 1846-48, is elaborated on occasionally throughout the film as a possible motivation for retreat. Spotting the Union stripe on his

pants, Bear Claw –an elderly Mountain Man who teaches Jeremiah woodcraft – asks if he missed “another war” to which Jeremiah responds, “you didn’t miss much.” Though not a specific allegory of Vietnam draft-dodgers and deserters escaping to Canada, the film certainly alludes to contemporary conflict, and draws upon an assumed desire for disaffected retreat into wilderness. Asked by Bear Claw while hunting elk why he didn’t like life “down there,” Jeremiah says evasively “it ought to have been different,” reiterating the lyrics of the title song:

Jeremiah Johnson made his way into the mountains

Betting on forgetting, all the troubles that he knew [...]

A mountain man’s a lonely man,

And he leaves a lot behind

It ought to have been different,

But you oftentimes will find,

That the story doesn’t always go as planned

Jeremiah’s story was that kind.

The folk ballad, sung over a montage of Jeremiah riding into the Rockies, captures a feeling of futility; the sense that retreat into wilderness is the sole remaining option, and that in the absence of any possibility for change, forgetting and negating society is preferable to living within it, but that it ought to have been different.

The series of spectacular vertical landscapes in the title sequence, rendered in static painterly compositions that recall Albert Bierstadt’s Rocky Mountain and Yosemite Valley works, create a sense of a metaphysical nature looming over Jeremiah in quiet judgement (the Mountain Men consistently personify “The Mountain,” as a benign judge or God). One shot during the opening sequence, also used as a still during the overture, stands out, effectively summarising the motivation and tenor of Jeremiah’s retreat: A small figure stands with his back to the camera on a rocky cliff to the far left of the frame, leaning on his rifle, gazing out across a vast landscape of craggy hills and valleys dotted with trees towards a mountain range far in the distance under a gloomy sky. Jeremiah stands, utterly dwarfed in the frame, contemplating a landscape neither threatening nor inviting, as if he were Meriwether Lewis, making first contact with uncharted territory (Fig. 21). Aside from the

basic natural resources required for subsistence, what the Mountain Man seeks above all else, as a measure of his discontent with civilization, with humanity itself, is empty space. Pollack alternates between vast panoramic spectacles of nature and close examinations of Redford's impassive expressions, which rarely deviates from a kind of distant melancholy. Despite finding the remotest wilderness, the Mountain Men remain vaguely dissatisfied, never taking any joy in fulfilling their ambitions of living alone in nature, as one reviewer noted, 'what the mountains offer is not so much sanctuary from the man-made world (far from exulting in nature, the mountain men appear preoccupied with the trials of their condition), as simply another arena in which they struggle to adapt their own natures'.⁸⁸

Whereas Zach Bass's malaise in *Man in the Wilderness* is quickly cured by his learning to survive in the wilderness, the Mountain Men in *Jeremiah Johnson* find that solitude and the remotest wilderness are not enough, that the alienation fostered by civilization persists. Jeremiah is offered an early warning of this fact as he discovers the frozen body of Hatchet Jack, another Mountain Man, who having finally succumbed to a bear attack, offers his sole possession – a superior rifle – to anyone who passes. Jeremiah reads Jack's comically indifferent note, which ends simply "anyway, I am dead," not realising it portends the futility of his chosen lifestyle. Bear Claw, himself hardly a model for the vocation, also cautions Jeremiah that "many a child journeys this high to be different, to get from here what their natures couldn't get them below," adding, "it comes to nothing."

The process of becoming a Mountain Man in *Jeremiah Johnson* is neither as arduous nor transformative as it is depicted in *Man in the Wilderness*; woodcraft is simply a skill shared among the Mountain Men and does not require feats of animalistic survival. Whereas *Man in the Wilderness* is about becoming in the wilderness, *Jeremiah Johnson* is concerned with the problem of being in wilderness. As such, Jeremiah is only occupied becoming a Mountain Man in the early part of the film and Robert Redford's persona hardly alters during the process. With the central objective of becoming a Mountain Man proving insufficient, Jeremiah spends the remainder of the film wandering, the narrative progressing predominantly through chance encounters. As McCarthy argues, the perpetual wandering of the Mountain Man ironically betrays a desire for home and belonging:

So much of the mountain man's screentime is devoted to wandering, being pursued, or acting as pursuer, that journeying becomes an end in itself [...] Rootless, aimless, even homeless, the mountain man is without a sense of place even in wild nature. Out of necessity he avoids attachment, freeing himself to roam at will. Unable to find happiness staying in one place, he travels continuously searching for things undefinable to him: security and stability (1995:121).

Jeremiah affects frustration at constantly encountering others (mountain men, settlers, and Indians both friendly and hostile) who prevent him from getting on with the business of being alone, yet like Josey Wales, he quickly finds new purpose in the surrogate family acquired through chance encounters. Despite his professed propensity for solitude, Jeremiah consistently evidences a social consciousness, by helping Del, the hapless Mountain Man, whom he discovers buried up to his neck in the desert, and by digging graves for a family murdered by Crow Indians. After adopting the mute boy who survived the massacre and having inadvertently received the gift of a Flathead Indian wife, Swan, Jeremiah – reluctantly at first – embraces his new family. In contrast to Look, the wife Martin unwittingly receives in *The Searchers* to which Polack certainly alludes, who is mocked as black comic relief, Swan is treated respectfully by Jeremiah as they learn to communicate and build a log cabin together in which to raise their adopted son Caleb. Far from the absolute solitude and animality of the Mountain Man, Jeremiah arrives at a more moderate Jeffersonian ideal of the self-sufficient citizen living off the land (Jeremiah tellingly shaves off his beard as the cabin is finished, symbolising a compromise with civilization in the form of folksy agrarianism). A reconstituted family and a home close to wilderness, but providing civilized refuge from the wilderness, ultimately lure Jeremiah – like Harry in *The Hired Hand* – away from a transient solitary life. In *Man in the Wilderness* too, reuniting with his abandoned son provides the impetus for Zach's survival and eventual return to civilization. Jeremiah's domestic idyll is inevitably shattered – Swan and Caleb are murdered by Crow Indians as revenge for Jeremiah's role in a U.S. cavalry unit trespassing on a sacred Crow burial ground – and subsequent return to the Mountain Man lifestyle is motivated less by the rejection of civilization than the loss of his family and home.

The subtle manner in which *Jeremiah Johnson* avoids any straightforward endorsement of the American propensity for anti-social retreat into wilderness is best illustrated by the scene, towards the end of the film, in which Jeremiah briefly reunites with Del in another chance encounter. Jeremiah evades questions about his wife and son as the pair catch up around a campfire before fending off another surprise assassination attempt by a Crow warrior. Del, realising Jeremiah's desperate situation, asks tentatively "maybe you'd best go down to a town, get out of these mountains." Jeremiah dismisses this suggestion simply, "I've seen a town, Del," confirming not only the full extent of his disillusionment with society – all towns simply by being forms of restrictive social organisation are untenable to the space seeking Mountain Man – but also revealing a defeated acceptance of his increasingly brutalised, and surely terminal, existence in the wilderness.

The following morning, Jeremiah and Del part ways, asking "which way now?" as they face a vast mountain range. Del, with slight trepidation, mentions his plan to trap beaver in the Blue Belt Mountains, curiously revealing his inexperience, "I ain't never trapped neither, sure would like too..." before Jeremiah interrupts him reassuringly: "You'll do well, Del." Even the most self-reliant of Mountain Men, it seems, need validation from others. Del, visibly more relaxed and encouraged by Jeremiah's confidence in his abilities, begins to rhapsodise about the life of a Mountain Man. Gazing out across the landscape he remarks "ain't this something?," triggering a cut from his point of view to illustrate the question (addressed to the spectator and Jeremiah), to a slow wide pan across nearly 360 degrees of spectacular mountainous landscape. Over the panning shot, Del reflects upon his parents' disapproval of his decision to go the mountains, before adding emphatically "the Rocky Mountains is the marrow of the world! By God, I was right!," as the camera completes its circuit and re-joins the pair. However, despite emanating from his point-of-view, it is at least questionable whether the landscape agrees with Del's proclamations. Awe-inspiring though the landscape may be, the muted palette of browns, light blues and greys and the absence of any feature or focal point within the landscape suggest only vast indifference; while the parched shrubs in the foreground, the leafless tree on the pair's left and the general lifelessness of the landscape positively contradict Del's claims about its richness and vitality. What is more, the panning shot does not fully complete its circuit and return to the shot of Del from which it was triggered, but instead subtly breaks spatial continuity by

returning to an as-yet-unestablished two-shot of Jeremiah scrutinising Del (a figure more commonly found in the art film modernism of Michelangelo Antonioni than a Hollywood western) (Fig. 22). By suggesting but ultimately denying the full 360 degree panorama of the landscape from Del's point of view, Pollack spatially undercuts his ego-centric view of the self as the centre and axis of nature. The subtle spatial disorientation serves to accentuate the irony that Del's boastful self-reliance depends entirely upon having an interlocutor to confirm his way of life.

After an intimate exchange of close-up glances, Del asks Jeremiah caringly which way he is headed, to which Jeremiah responds, exposing the central irony of the Mountain Man, "Canada, maybe. I hear there's land there a man has never seen." With the wilderness bringing Jeremiah more tragic loss and continuing conflict, Jeremiah, not realising an inherent paradox, can only dream of further retreat into absolute wilderness. What he ultimately desires is an elemental, hypothetical wild space, a kind of Schrödinger's wilderness, which can be conceived, but not directly experienced. To exist within an absolute wilderness is to destroy it, to render it definitively less wild; to designate an area of wilderness is to bring it within the controlling auspices of knowledge and civilization. The quest for absolute wilderness is therefore futile and self-defeating, or necessarily hypocritical and solipsistic, requiring the individual to exclude their own consciousness from humanity as a whole. Jeremiah's desire for land "a man has never seen" captures an essential irony about the place of wilderness in American culture, contained in the official definition, written into federal law in 1964:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognised as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.⁸⁹

Wilderness, a concept fundamental to American ideas of freedom, cannot subsist as a practical basis for American life; it is ultimately, as Roderick Nash puts it, 'a state of mind' (1973:273). Whereas *Man in the Wilderness* appears to endorse temporary rejuvenating retreat into wilderness – in line with the early seventies trend for wilderness leisure – as a solution to this paradox, *Jeremiah Johnson* underscores the contradictions of wilderness retreat as a solution to alienation within American civilization, thereby implying the need for reconciliation between society and nature. As McAllister

writes, 'the vision [the film] presents is ultimately pessimistic, an urgent denial of the romantic daydream of escaping from white civilization into a new Eden' (1978:36).

Jeremiah fails to find his absolute wilderness, but unlike Zach Bass in *Man in the Wilderness*, he does not return to civilization. Prior to the film's conclusion Jeremiah – now visibly toughened in appearance and donning a whole bearskin – once again runs into Bear Claw, a vision of his future, confirming his acceptance of living on society's periphery. However, Robert Redford's persona – mild, stoical, slightly unknowable – prevents Jeremiah from lapsing into a stereotype of the mad, animalistic wild man. His survival means the film should not be seen as a critique of the American preoccupation with individualistic wilderness retreat as a solution to alienation, with a politics of negation in response to social problems; *Jeremiah Johnson* fully participates in the Mountain Man fantasy while exposing its fundamental contradictions. The film ends as Jeremiah encounters Paints His Shirt Red, the Crow chief, who extends his arm as a gesture of respect, and perhaps finally, peace. In a freeze-frame image, Jeremiah reciprocates, gritting his teeth with an obscure air of defiance, relief or desperation. Whereas freeze-frame endings, widely deployed in the Hollywood Renaissance, usually serve an emphatic purpose – in *Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Harold and Maude* (1971), *Two Lane Blacktop* (1971) or *Bad Company* (1972), for instance – in *Jeremiah Johnson* the device simply punctuates the anti-climactic ambiguity of Jeremiah's expression (Fig. 23). With a reprise of the title song, "and some folks say, he's up there still," the frozen image of Jeremiah dissolves into the landscape, becoming myth, rumour and legend. While *Jeremiah Johnson* cannot endorse the lifestyle of the Mountain Man as a concrete possibility or practical solution, the subtlety with which it explores the contradictions of the Mountain Man belies an attraction to the concept, and the film's commercial success must too be based on the broad appeal of wilderness retreat, a measure of aimless discontent.

I Pity the Country: Native Americans and the Hollywood Renaissance

Now, a century later, in an age without heroes, they are perhaps the most heroic of all Americans – Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, 1971 (2008:12).

I wish I was a trapper
I would give thousand pelts
To sleep with Pocahontas
And find out how she felt
In the mornin'
on the fields of green
In the homeland
we've never seen.

- Neil Young & Crazy Horse, 'Pocahontas', 1979

From the mid-1960s and throughout the 1970s, Native Americans emerge as a powerful force in American politics, more so perhaps than at any point since the New Deal, and move from the periphery to the centre of popular culture. Tribes galvanised into political movements demanding rights for Native Americans and speaking out on contemporary issues like the Vietnam War and environmental protection, while uprisings and protests caught the public's attention for the first time in several generations. In *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn suggests that by the early sixties, Native Americans were 'gathering energy for resistance, thinking about how to change their situation, poised to organise' (2005:526) preparing to join the civil rights movement with a series of increasingly daring uprisings against the federal government in protest against centuries of broken treaties: In March 1964 Native Americans of Washington State staged a series of 'fish-ins' to protest against the breaking of federal treaties ensuring unrestricted fishing rights which caught the nation's attention partly due to the support of Marlon Brando (Smith, 2012:18-42). In November 1969, Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay was occupied by up to six hundred Indians representing nearly

fifty tribes, ironically claiming the prison as a suitable reservation and promoting a peaceful and ecologically harmonious Native American society Smith (Smith, 2012:78-112). And in November 1972, shortly before the presidential election, various Native American rights groups marched on Washington, the so-called Trail of Broken Treaties, demanding sovereignty for all Indian Nations (White, 1991:586). The climax to Native American activism occurred shortly afterwards, on February 27th 1973, as three hundred Oglala Sioux, members of the militant American Indian Movement (AIM), entered Wounded Knee and declared it liberated territory. The resultant siege with the FBI lasted seventy-one days, with intermittent gunfights killing two AIM members. History had not quite repeated itself; both sides agreed to disarm, the occupiers were arrested, and the government promised to investigate Indian affairs.⁹⁰

Incremental gains and partial successes were achieved by the Native American rights movement, as tribal sovereignty gradually replaced forced assimilation as government policy through the 1970s. Whether any concrete political change had been achieved that might empower and improve the lives of the one million or so Native Americans living half on reservations and half in towns is questionable at least. What had changed definitively and irreversibly was the place of Native Americans within popular culture. Not only were Indians fashionable once again – in films, popular music, literature and fashion – new representational conventions quickly emerged, conveying new attitudes towards Native American cultures. The embrace of Native Americans by a predominantly white popular culture was fostered by the conjuncture of the rise of Native American political activism, the wider opposition to the ongoing war in Vietnam, and the wider-still sense of alienation and dissatisfaction with everyday life. The United States' involvement in the Vietnam War only added urgency to the condemnation which had grown since the early 1960s, enhancing awareness of the need to resist domestic forms of imperialism as well as those abroad and therefore drawing attention towards the plight of Native Americans. 'The particular confluence of contemporary issues,' writes historian Sherry L. Smith, 'made Indians especially interesting, appealing, and relevant to the nation's restless, reform-orientated, discontented, outraged and alienated souls (2012:6).

For those opposed to the war in Vietnam, the genocidal mistreatment of Native Americans – luridly detailed in Dee Brown's bestselling history *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* – compounded

evidence against the contemporary government, casting the present war as another act in a long history of imperial aggression. Similarly, some Hollywood Renaissance westerns used the conflict between U.S. cavalry and Indians as a thin allegorical veil for the major absent theme of the era (*The Green Berets* aside, the Vietnam War did not feature explicitly as the subject of a Hollywood film until 1978 with *The Deer Hunter* and *Coming Home*). Critics have frequently noted that the revisionist projects of such films as *Soldier Blue* (1970), *Chato's Land* (1972) and *Ulzana's Raid* (1972) are secondary to their offering an allegorical critique of contemporary U.S. foreign policy. In *Soldier Blue*, the U.S. cavalry's senseless slaughter of a peaceful village of Cheyenne – rendered in gruesomely explicit detail that initially earned the film an X rating – deliberately resembled the My Lai massacre of March 1968, the details of which were disclosed to the public in late 1969. *Chato's Land* and *Ulzana's Raid* both portray the escalating futility and horror of guerrilla warfare between Apaches and renegade bands of U.S. cavalry or makeshift law enforcement, offering fairly straightforward parallels with the contemporary conflict and prefiguring Hollywood's direct treatment of the Vietnam War, for instance in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) or *Platoon* (1986). The Indian in Vietnam-inflected westerns is merely a handy substitute; a device used to make broad historical claims about the ongoing propensity for intolerance and violence in the United States. Hollywood's readiness to expose the mistreatment of Native Americans and partially redress their representation onscreen is suggestive of how a degree of cultural sensitivity towards Native cultures, and an apologetic awareness of their mistreatment in the past, was uncontroversially adopted and neutralised. (This is dryly pointed out in the opening of John Singleton's gangster drama set in South Central LA, *Boyz n The Hood* (1991), as a white primary school teacher earnestly reproves herself for using the now-politically incorrect term 'Indians' while teaching a history class that ignores the role of Black Americans in an exclusively Black classroom). The United States' crimes against Native Americans could be safely contained in a previous century (or so it was assumed) and despite the best efforts of AIM, Native militant radicalism could not match the Black Power movement in numbers or perceived threat to white society.

Far more widespread however than the adoption of Indians merely as allegorical anti-government devices is the identification with Native Americans in the popular counterculture. In

complex and varied forms (many admittedly open to critiques of superficiality, cultural imperialism, exoticism or ignorance) the counterculture expressed the belief that Native Americans were the model of authenticity, as Todd Gitlin puts it, ‘more deeply American than anyone else’ (1986:216), representing an ‘antidote to the various ills of western society’ (Buscombe, 2005:11), and a paradigm for the counterculture itself (Slotkin, 1992:629). Native Americans were conceived less as a race of people, rather as a condition of deep-rootedness, naturalness, communality and heroic opposition to mainstream society, to which one could aspire. As Smith describes, those who became known as hippies were among the first non-Indians of the post-war generation to take an interest in Native Americans, and despite their shortcomings, helped to bring Indian issues to the nation’s attention:

Hippies “discovered” Indians and found them attractive because they presumably offered an actual, living base for an alternative American identity [...] Many looked to Indians as symbols of, even models for alternative ways of life. Native Americans seemed like perfect foils, in fact, to all that the predominantly Anglo Americans despised about their own culture. Indians, supposedly, were not only spiritual and ecological but also tribal and communal (2012:7).

The Hippie Indian might have offered an actual living alternative, a model for the social realisation of American Authenticity, yet this model was not derived from the plight of Indians living on reservations, but rather from a fusion of contemporary counterculture with elements of extinct tribal cultures of the nineteenth century.

There are precedents for this kind of cultural appropriation. As William R. Handley argues about *The Vanishing American* (1925), an epic silent western adaptation of Zane Grey’s relatively sympathetic novel about the decline and subjugation of Native Americans, periods of cultural crisis have prompted the absorption of native cultures in an ‘authenticating act of cultural theft, a culture of ‘first Americans’’ (2007:45). If America wanted to have a native culture, it could not ignore the culture of its natives. Handley describes, in terms strikingly resonant with the counterculture’s own appropriation of native cultures, how the Immigration Act of 1924, which severely capped the flow of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, together with the Indian Citizen Act of the same year, created the need to ‘shore up an American national culture’: ‘Indians provided a source and model for

American culture as the ‘exemplary instance of a society that could be understood as having a culture’ – and, moreover, an ‘authentic’ one, in contrast to the mechanised and materialist society of modernity’ (2007:46).⁹¹ Thoreau initiated the championing of Native American culture a century before Hollywood, casting Indians as a tragic ideal of wholeness and symbiosis, doomed to be trampled by the relentless charge of white civilization.⁹² Indians have long functioned as rhetorical devices, as imagined antidotes to modern life in the United States, and vessels for (predominantly white male) alienation. In order for the inauthenticity of life in the United States to be proven, one needs an exemplary American culture as its antithesis, but moreover a culture victimised by the United States. Thus, the function of Indians as an archetype of American Authenticity depends upon their vanishing; a perpetual teetering on the brink of extermination; just visible enough to register as an alternative already foreclosed. As Handley puts it, ‘once is never enough when it comes to watching Indians vanishing’ (2007:46).

Hollywood occasionally embraced the concept of the Vanishing American, in pro-Indian westerns like *Broken Arrow*, *Devil’s Doorway* or *Run of the Arrow* (Sam Fuller, 1957), whether for the purposes of allegorising contemporary racial divisions in society, or simply offering an alternative in a genre oversaturated with bad Indians. In John Ford’s apologetic account of the mistreatment of Indians by the U.S government *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), there is a scene which dryly points out the potential profitability of Indian sympathies, as a newspaper editor decides to offer a different angle on various atrocity stories: “from now on we’re going to *grieve* for the red man!” During the Hollywood Renaissance, sympathetic treatments of Native Americans and concomitant admonishments of the U.S government became the overwhelming rule, rather than the exception. Hollywood did not engender sympathy with Native Americans in its audience, but rather spotted a more lucrative market in counterculturally-inclined youths with liberal values and a desire to ‘go native.’ Westerns remain narratives told from a white point of view, both in terms of their authorship and protagonists. Indeed changes in the relationship between white protagonists and Indians are arguably more significant than changes in the representation of Indians.

In Elliot Silverstein’s *A Man Called Horse* (1970), an English nobleman (Richard Harris) is transformed by the experience of being captive and assimilated by Sioux society. In *Soldier Blue*

(1970), an American girl (Candice Bergen) identifies with the Cheyenne after witnessing the brutality of the U.S cavalry. And in Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970), Jack Crabb (Dustin Hoffman) reflects upon his life lived alternately with a peaceful Cheyenne tribe and within a picaresque vision of a corrupt white civilization. Writing about the changing role of the Indian in the western, film critic Phillip French found that 'each of these pictures, in varying ways, presents Indian life as a valid counterculture – a more organic, life-enhancing existence than white society – from which the central character gains a new perspective on society and a new humanity' (1980:104). What Native Americans offered, I shall argue, is a way of conceiving of an American Authenticity that was countercultural, oppositional, and – crucially – communal. A comparison of three major revisionist westerns whose central project is redressing the representation of Native Americans as authentic solutions to contemporary alienation – *A Man Called Horse*, *Little Big Man*, and *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* (Abraham Polonsky, 1969) – reveals however that filmmakers championed the Hippie Indian in different ways and to varying degrees of success. However, I do not wish to reduce the Hollywood Renaissance's interest in Native Americans to another allegorical device (i.e. representations of the hippie counterculture, rather than the Vietnam War), rather to ask what contemporary relevance or meaning these films find through their dramatization of historical encounters with Native Americans.

A Man Called Horse advertised its serious historical intentions prominently, boastfully promoted in the press as "the first authentic portrait of the American Indian set in a time of savage innocence and beauty" and introduced by a title card citing various historical sources, and expressing gratitude to museums and libraries.⁹³ By the standards of the Hollywood western, its claim of representing the Sioux with a hitherto unprecedented degree of accuracy and cultural sensitivity is not altogether unjustified: Director Elliott Silverstein hired Clyde Dollar, an historian of the Sioux to ensure that due attention was paid to native language (which makes up some 80% of the dialogue), headdresses, dwellings, artifacts, masks and ceremonial paint. Somewhat ironically, however, it was precisely this purported 'authenticity' – in the form of historical and ethnographical attention to detail – that drew criticism from writers suddenly alive to issues surrounding the representation of Native Americans, many of whom felt it mere cover or window-dressing for deeply traditional, even regressive themes. Radical historian Dan Georgakas wrote, 'the only trouble is that all this

authenticity is an illusion and a waste. The film is a fantasy from start to finish' (1972:26). Buffy Sainte-Marie, Cree Indian folksinger and activist, singled out the film as epitomising the abidingly white point of view and lack of empathy in Hollywood's treatment of Native Americans: "Even so-called authentic movies like *A Man Called Horse* – that's the whitest movie I've ever seen."⁹⁴

Kenneth Geist, in his review for *Village Voice* similarly declared *A Man Called Horse*, 'calculated exploitation in the name of historical authenticity.'⁹⁵

The 'Vow of the Sun' ritual, which graphically depicts Morgan being suspended in the air by hooks piercing his chest, in order to receive a vision (included as a brief trippy interlude) and be married into the tribe, forms the film's centrepiece. Among a litany of inaccuracies, many of which were pointed out by an angry Sioux writing to the *Village Voice*,⁹⁶ and by Russell Means, an Oglala-Sioux activist (and latterly actor) who led a boycott of the film, the treatment of the 'vow of the sun' was found to be the most damning. The ritual is shown not as a religious rite, but rather as a masochistic test of courage and bravery, through which Morgan proves his mettle and wins his bride Running Bear (played by Corinna Tsopei, a Greek and former Miss Universe, attesting to the limits of progressive representation). The gory and near-psychedelic spectacle of the 'vow of the sun' seemed to emblemise the wider problem to do with the film's point of view, summarised by Dan Georgakas, as follows:

Rather than a tale of Indian life, *Horse* is really about a white nobleman proving his superiority in the wilds [...] Stripped of its pretensions, *Horse* parades the standard myth that white men can do everything better than the Indian. Give him a little time and he will marry the best looking girl (a princess, of course) and will end up chief of the tribe (1972:27-7).

There are echoes here of the discursive struggles that surrounded Hollywood's attempts to lure youth audiences in the same period with a brief (and unsuccessful) cycle of youth rebellion or 'campus revolt' films which included *Medium Cool* (1969), *The Strawberry Statement* (1970), *Getting Straight* (1970) and *RPM* (1970). Aniko Bodroghkozy has examined how these films were often received with scepticism by the countercultural press, as a media savvy youth audience became highly sensitive to co-optation and exploitation by Hollywood (2002:55). Just as student radicals wondered how their struggles could possibly be conveyed by a commercial film industry, an audience suddenly attuned (if

myopically) to the historical mistreatment of Native Americans now being championed as the true American heroes, wondered how a Hollywood western could hope to overcome its white supremacist origins. There is an irony to the fact that a film that went to such an unprecedented effort to repair the representation of Native Americans, however modish its intentions or flawed its results, would come under the harshest scrutiny for something which the majority of the Hollywood westerns scarcely attempted.

Despite striving to attain an aura of ethnographical sensitivity as a kind of reparation for Hollywood's standard stereotypical representations, *A Man Called Horse* is at core firmly within the Noble Savage tradition. Much like the experience of surviving in nature in Richard Harris's follow-up *Man in the Wilderness*, life with the Sioux is a gruelling physical test which sees Morgan stripped of his old world aristocratic privilege and reduced to a naked servile animal ("Horse"), before being reborn – through his guile, and inherent physical and intellectual superiority – as a man perfectly balanced between savagery and civilization; a thoroughly Rousseauian hero. Just as Zach Bass returns to civilization the moment he is habituated to life as a Mountain Man, Morgan returns to England soon after having become the tribe's chief and vanquished their enemies (until *The Return of a Man Called Horse* (1976) and *Triumphs of a Man Called Horse* (1983) the film's two unlikely sequels). The Sioux therefore do not represent an authentic alternative to American society, whether in 1825 or in the context of the hippie counterculture, but much like the wilderness in the Mountain Man films, tribal life is recommended as a self-enlarging challenge and antidote to the malaise of the modern gentleman. The film's insistence on Sioux language precludes identification with any Indian point of view (there are no subtitles; like Morgan our understanding is gleaned only from the clownish ravings of a captive half-French Indian), rendering the tribe mysterious and unknowable.

A Man Called Horse exploits the contemporary vogue for 'going native' but in rendering its subjects unknowable, filtered through the consciousness of a dissatisfied aristocrat indulging in a primitivistic sabbatical, the film fails to empathise with Native Americans, or to consider their lifestyle seriously as an alternative. As M. Elise Marubbio writes, 'the film's thematic promotion of the superior white emancipator and its pseudoethnographical depiction of a "savage" lifestyle seem an improbable validation of Native American tradition as a countercultural option' (2006:174). Indeed

for all the effort expended on accurately representing the details of early nineteenth century Sioux life, *A Man Called Horse* recommends little more about that society than the earthy eroticism of the ‘savage’ Indian princess, and the restoration of the self as a result of temporarily ‘going native’. Beyond a brief exposition of Morgan’s aristocratic restlessness in the opening sequence, as he explains how he grew tired of a life of inherited privilege (“everything I ever wanted in life I bought”), as an appeal perhaps to the affluent middle-class anomie of the counterculture, the absence of a position towards white civilization in the film means native society cannot function as an alternative.

Despite adhering to a similar ‘going native’ theme, Arthur Penn’s *Little Big Man*, in contrast to *A Man Called Horse*, is structured around juxtapositions of white U.S. society and Native American society replete with allusions to the late sixties counterculture. Whereas Morgan is captured and degraded by the Sioux, the young orphaned Jack Crabb is adopted by the kindly Cheyenne and quickly assimilated: “I wasn’t just playing Indian, I was living Indian” he says, over a short montage of the boy – whose racial difference is readily nullified as Burns Red In The Sun helps cover his skin in mud – learning to ride a horse bareback and use a bow and arrow. Critics have frequently noted that the idealised Cheyenne are partly modelled on the fashions and mores of the counterculture, ‘surrogate hippies’ as Buscombe puts it (2006:135), in order to represent an exemplary (if slightly anachronistic) authentic society.⁹⁷ The tribe are known as the Human Beings, carrying the provocative implication, largely borne out as the film progresses, of white civilization’s inhumanity, but also echoes of ‘The Human Be-In’, the mass gathering in Haight-Ashbury in January 1967 which came to represent the peak of the hippie counterculture. The Cheyenne are rendered as pacifists living modestly in pre-capitalist symbiotic communality, tolerant of difference (as demonstrated by Little Horse, a comedic eyelash-fluttering camp stereotype based loosely on the sexually ambiguous role of the *heemaneh*, or Younger Bear as the Contrary who does everything backwards, a hippie freak interpretation of a ceremonial social role⁹⁸), and unconstrained by repressive or ‘straight’ social conventions, represented by Jack’s “great copulation” under buffalo hides with his wife Sunshine’s three sisters (a free-love era polyamorous fantasy with no basis in actual Cheyenne society). The Cheyenne in *Little Big Man* are the product of a sometimes incompatibly bifurcated strategy of

revisionist ethnography (Penn stressed in interviews that he lived among the tribe during the production and consulted the elders' council about their traditions⁹⁹) alongside countercultural allegory.

Where these divergent representational paths are reconciled, and where Penn attempts to anchor the film from a Native American point-of-view, is in the sagely eccentric character of the tribal chief Old Lodge Skins (Chief Dan George), the film's 'ideological centre' (Georgakas, 1972:30), around whom an 'evanescent tribal patriarchy' (Slotkin, 1992:629) is idealised. At key intervals in the film's episodic narrative Old Lodge Skins comments upon the action and presents his world-view, anticipating the inevitable decline of the Human Beings in near-monologue addresses, with Penn's camera trained on his lined face in lingering close-ups. Through Old Lodge Skins, Penn attempts to reverse the perspective on Native Americans as Other, rendering modern America as alien: "They are strange. They do not seem to know where the centre of the Earth is....," he says, upon viewing the aftermath of a U.S. cavalry massacre. After Custer's Seventh Cavalry slaughter women and children in a battle against the Cheyenne, Old Lodge Skins gives an impassioned speech about Human Beings respecting all life, but whites wanting everything dead. Finally, after the Washita river massacre and the Battle of Little Big Horn, Old Lodge Skins, now a blind visionary, realising the inevitable extinction of the Cheyenne, chooses to offer up his life to the Great Spirit, and imparts his final words to Jack: "There is an endless supply of white men, but there has always been a limited number of human beings. We won today. We won't win tomorrow [...] the human beings will walk a road that leads nowhere." However, Old Lodge Skins is not afforded his transcendence; he is, as Penn puts it 'condemned to live' (2008:84). As the vast skies of the plains open, Old Lodge Skins resignedly says "sometimes the magic works, sometimes it doesn't" and he and Jack trudge back to the depleted camp (Fig. 24). The pathos of this moment only serves to heighten Old Lodge Skins as the embodiment of an authentic ideal by denying his omniscience; the old man and the society he represents are allowed to be fallible, a subtlety not afforded in the depiction of white civilization in the film.

Where most 'going native' narratives, from *Broken Arrow* to *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990), begin with the protagonist moving from white to native civilization, Penn reverses this trajectory (present-day prologue aside), as an already-assimilated Jack transitions back into white

civilization, thereby altering the frame of reference with which we can interpret the film's events (white civilization, or lack thereof, is contrasted with native civilization, rather than *vice versa*). Old Lodge Skins and the Cheyenne therefore become 'the moral centre against which the corrupt values of the major white characters can be measured' (Hilger, 1995:179). Whereas the Cheyenne, in spite of their displacement and erosion, are shown to retain their traditions and unity, U.S. society is represented in a series of fragmented satirical vignettes, each based on one of the 'phases' Jack goes through as he struggles to survive outside the tribe. Together, Jack's adventures in white civilization constitute a systematic mockery of many of the genre's established conventions, archetypes and values, marked with a parodic tone bordering on farce or burlesque: In his religious phase Jack is taken in by a bilious zealot of a reverend totally ignorant of the barely contained sexual tension exhibited by his unfaithful younger wife Mrs Pendrake (Faye Dunaway) towards Jack. The hypocrisy of the Pendrakes is contrasted with the deception of the larcenous huckster Allardyce T. Meriwether (Martin Balsam), a snake-oil salesman with a cheerfully nihilistic attitude, for whom Jack performs as a shill, discredits assumptions about the West as a site of honest enterprise and opportunity. Meriwether progressively loses limbs throughout the film, presumably as punishment for his fraudulence, and Jack's own phase as a storekeeper is short-lived, as his business partner runs off with the capital. Jack's "gunfighter period" is perhaps the most openly parodic of all his phases, mocking the conventions of ritualised near-supernatural gunmanship in the genre as Crabb learns to "shoot a gun before touching it," before taking his place alongside a jittery caricature of Wild Bill Hickok presiding over a saloon. Jack as the self-styled Soda Pop Kid is woefully inadequate as a gunslinger, lying about the number of men he has "done in" and blanching at the sight of blood, as Hoffman's self-conscious performance accentuates the artificiality and emptiness of the role he is attempting to emulate. And finally, in Jack's phases as a military scout, George Armstrong Custer is depicted as a ludicrous figure of preening political ambition and racist megalomania with a violent death wish. In short, not a revisionist interpretation of the myth of the ill-fated hero, but rather an equally exaggerated counter-myth or inversion.

Altogether Penn constructs an impression of U.S. society as cruel, hypocritical, intolerant, and murderous through a fairly comprehensive parodying of genre conventions and archetypes, which

renders the outwardly familiar setting devoid of value, insubstantial and artificial. But as I have already argued, these broken episodes are deviations from the film's diegetic, ideological and moral centre of the Cheyenne, whose meaning depends upon their antithetical relationship with the society pushing them to the brink of extermination. As ever, authenticity is hard to define in and of itself. Penn implies the authenticity of native civilization by establishing, through marked shifts in tone (a formal signature of Penn's from *Bonnie and Clyde*), the relative *inauthenticity* of white civilization. Douglas Pye usefully defines a film's tone as the ways in which it 'addresses its spectator and implicitly invites us to understand its attitude to its material and the stylistic register it employs' (2007:7). In *Little Big Man* these shifts in tonal register, from playful or lacerating irony in the western parody/U.S. society sequences to the alternately light-hearted and melancholy sincerity of the Cheyenne sequences, offer the spectator two contrasting affective keynotes with which to interpret the two civilizations. Penn treats traditional frontier mythology with a cool irony that emphasises its emptiness and contradictions, appealing to a cynical movie-literate audience with anti-establishment convictions, while simultaneously treating the victims *within* that same mythology with a sincerity that gives the Cheyenne relative meaningfulness and depth, appealing to the same audience's desire for the values they represent.

The stark tonal/moral contrasts and appeal to contemporary structures of feeling in *Little Big Man* drew criticism from some contemporary critics. Susan Rice remarked that by attempting to 'mingle bathos and pathos' and 'fashion a revolutionary view of history' the film was 'counterproductive by its own excess,' offering no new historical, ethnographical, or cultural insight (1971:43-44). Georgakas concluded similarly that '*Little Big Man* is two movies in one. One paints a sympathetic picture of Indian life and the other is a crude burlesque of the white West. Nowhere is there a clash of real values. We identify with the Indians because they are nice' (1972:30). The excessive didacticism of *Little Big Man* even caught the attention of the Russian Communist party paper *Pravda*, which praised Penn for having exposed 'the enormous crimes against mankind that have marked the path of capitalism from the beginning to our days'.¹⁰⁰ However, what interpretations such as these miss is the way the film foregrounds the possible unreliability of its own narration,

which together with Jack Crabb's function as a picaresque protagonist, problematises the authenticity of the Cheyenne, placing them in an uncertain temporal and historical context.

In the picaresque tradition, Jack is a roguish protagonist whose only consistent motivation is survival in a bewilderingly complex world he is incapable of understanding or meaningfully influencing. Where Jack does become conventionally 'goal-orientated' – be it to become a famous gunslinger, a successful storekeeper, or to assassinate Custer – he is quickly frustrated and returns to living by his wits. In his oscillation between native and white civilizations, Penn emphasises Jack's lack of historical agency and the role of coincidence, foregrounding the sort of mechanisms strenuously avoided in classical plotting.¹⁰¹ Jack drifts back and forth between the two civilizations, whether through self-preservation on the battlefield, or through chance encounters with the Cheyenne. The most flagrantly coincidental transition of all occurs as Jack attempts to take his own life by throwing himself off a cliff during his failed trapper phase (Jack is no Jeremiah Johnson): spotting Custer's army marching towards the Battle of Little Big Horn from his vantage point, Jack resists suicide at the last second, instead deciding to rejoin Custer as a 'double-agent' scout.

Throughout the film, Jack, carrying a residue of Hoffman's Benjamin Braddock in *The Graduate* (1967), the archetypal sixties unmotivated drifter, fails to take any decision that is not purely reactive. Jack's identification with native civilization and his admonishment of U.S society are not authentic choices made in the course of the film, rather reflections on coincidental events he failed to fully understand, from a point in time where such a choice is no longer possible. By failing to adopt Old Lodge Skins's world-view until after the fact, Jack's identification with the Cheyenne is arguably no more substantial than any of his other phases. As Leo Braudy remarks in his review, Jack's lack of moral authority and his fragmentation into 'an incoherent handful of selves' is the central difficulty of *Little Big Man*:

Jack Crabb could have been the moral centre of *Little Big Man*, but he is not. Amid all the certainties of the other characters, he could have been the one who knew all at their proper value and could act wisely and well. But he never seems to come to terms with his own nature. If he has learned anything from his experience, he has not been able to act on his

experience [...] Authentic life exists in many parts of *Little Big Man*, but the film remains only in fragments (1971:33).

Jack's picaresque character and his part in a fragmentary yarn-like narrative which insists upon its own unreliability (the tagline: '[he] was either the most neglected hero in history or a liar of insane proportion!'), might suggest total bewilderment in the face of history or a cynical denial of any possibility for western authenticity (recalling Mark Twain's prefatory note to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: 'persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.') were it not for the unmistakable melancholy – in Braudy's words 'a palpable sense of loss – the loss of time, of youth and of opportunity' (1971:33) – elicited by the framing device of the prologue and epilogue.

The opening sequence of an implausibly aged Jack Crabb being interviewed about his experiences with the Cheyenne by a young historian in a present-day nursing home, functions initially as a modern take on the classical generic convention of having a title card assert the historical authority of what is to follow. Penn uses the ostensibly familiar (though relatively rare in the western) device of the flashback narrative not simply to anchor the audience's perspective and epistemic relation to the story within the consciousness of a particular character, but moreover to raise questions about conflicting points-of-view on events, fallibility, and historical interpretation. The earnest and patronising tweed-suited historian (an emissary of what would be known as new western history) exposes his preconceptions towards Jack's story, saying he is not interested in "tall tales" but rather in the "primitive lifestyle of the plains Indian" and their "near-genocide" at the hands of white civilization (pointedly addressed to the audience as "we"). As a rebuke to this slightly self-righteous and fashionable anti-imperialism, Jack angrily proposes to set the record straight through an account of his direct experiences saying, "I know General George Armstrong Custer for what he was, and I also knowed the Indians for that they was," the ungrammatical slippage of tense providing the first clue about the fate of the Cheyenne.

By offering two distinct, but not necessarily conflicting perspectives on the events to follow Penn problematises the narration by drawing attention to the ambiguous relation between who is

telling the story and what we see on screen. As Crabb begins to recount his distant memory of his family being slaughtered by Indians, there is a slow fade from a close up of Dustin Hoffman's prosthetically aged face to a slow pan of burning wagons on a vast plain, with a man gruesomely slain over an absurdly out of place chaise longue in the foreground. The voice-over narration combined with the classical figure of the push-in fade suggests that the story emanates from Jack's interiority, immediately raising questions about the reliability of – or the motives behind – his reminiscences (leaving aside the fact that at an alleged 121 years old, Jack is pushing the limits of human senescence, and with it the audience's credulity). Yet as filmic point-of-view is necessarily overdetermined, what we see on screen also carries Penn's implied authorship, and the suggestion of being filtered through the consciousness of the interviewer (like the shadowy investigator Jerry Thompson in *Citizen Kane*). In the end, Crabb's story confirms the historian's ideas about "near-genocide," but given his lack of understanding of the events he has lived through, fails to get to the truth of either the Cheyenne or Custer; the historian's pitying platitude of "I never knew" at the end of the film refers to Jack's personal loss, rather than any significant historical realisation.

The epistemic uncertainty engendered by the epilogue does not contradict the countercultural authenticity of the Cheyenne, but rather ensures that an air of historical dramatic irony hangs over the film: however authentic and appealing their pre-modern communal lifestyle might appear, it is frustratingly unrealisable, for Jack fails to fully commit to the Cheyenne, or to realise the threat posed by advancing U.S. civilization. The tragedy of the film is not simply the inevitable extermination of the Cheyenne, and with it the authentic alternative they represent, but more significantly, the inevitable triumph of its antithesis. *Little Big Man* 'proposes nostalgia for an idealised pre-capitalist past' according to Slotkin, yet 'sees the power of the modern capitalist state as historically irresistible, doomed to success' (1992:639). The interview framing device means that a potentially familiar narrative of the U.S. cavalry's wars with Native Americans (albeit reinterpreted as imperialist genocide) cannot remain a hermetically sealed episode in American history, but rather one which spills over into the present. (Many critics who categorise *Little Big Man* as a 'Vietnam Western' miss this redoubled historicity¹⁰²: the atrocities against Native Americans are not allegorical substitutions

for similar U.S. army atrocities in Indochina; if there are echoes of contemporary conflict, these point towards an ideological critique of a century of unbroken subjection and abuse by U.S military power).

Penn's black humour and cool irony cannot mitigate the straightforward sense of helpless melancholy at the film's conclusion. As Old Lodge Skins is led away from the Cheyenne burial ground the camera cranes upwards, diminishing and blending the two figures into the landscape. A slow fade to a longer shot shows the pair, now barely visible, before another a final fade to a long shot of the muted landscape, lashed by rain, obliterates Old Lodge Skins and the Cheyenne altogether. As Jack holds his head and stares into the near distance in the dark hospital ward, this vanishing of the Cheyenne is compounded; Jack is forced to relive the extermination of that near yet unapproachable authentic society, 'condemned to live' if only for a short while longer, until even the memory of that possibility is annihilated. The sense of loss and historical vertigo at the end of *Little Big Man* – a mood of American tragedy underscored by the anachronistic Delta blues soundtrack – offers a compelling link to the temper of the seventies. By reviving the 'Vanishing American' trope within the context of the perplexing aftermath of the tumultuous sixties, Penn draws upon the nostalgic desire for disaffected retreat into pre-modern innocent communality, only to deny the possibility of such a return. Ultimately, the Cheyenne function neither as a sincere attempt at revisionist ethnography, nor as a representation of the hippie counterculture, but rather somewhere between these two images, as an expression of the need for an authentic social space outside of the myths and narratives of modern capitalist society. The projection of American Authenticity onto Native Americans in *Little Big Man* might be understood as the transposition of the elegiac mode of the 'end of the line' western from the West itself to a specific society and culture, whose authenticity is similarly apprehensible only at the point of extermination.

Cast as vessels for white middle class alienation, the representation of Native Americans in *Little Big Man* cannot evade the perennial criticism, here articulated by Armando José Prats, that Native Americans are locked in the past, and seen only in retrospect from a privileged white point of view: '[Jack Crabb's] story may only be narrated from this distance: across the spans of time the Indian appears already vestigial, ephemeral, vanished – the source at once of remorse and nostalgia, the embodied plea, as the revisionist voice understands it, for pity' (2002:155). This tendency for

Native Americans to figure as historically marooned objects of pity and mourning in the revisionist western is resisted in Abraham Polonsky's *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* (1969), a sombre and confrontational modern western – the formerly blacklisted writer-director's first credited film since *Force of Evil* (1948) – about the pursuit of the eponymous Willie Boy, accused of murder and kidnap, as he flees across the Mojave desert. Native Americans in *Willie Boy* are not conceived as sentimentalised paradigms of lost authenticity, but rather as an oppressed minority: subsisting on impoverished reservations within modern America, subjected to condescending management by federal agencies, denied basic rights, and treated with intolerance and suspicion that spreads and corrupts.

Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here is adapted from journalist Harry Lawton's novel about an actual – if disputed and unverifiable – historical incident in which a drunken Paiute Indian, Willie Boy, is alleged to have killed a sleeping man and abducted his daughter. When she began to slow his flight, Willie Boy murdered her and ran off across the desert, evading the pursuing posses with extraordinary endurance and cunning. A week later he encountered another posse and in the ensuing shootout, down to his last bullet, Willie Boy committed suicide.¹⁰³ In Polonsky's version, the moral polarity is reversed: Willie Boy (Robert Blake) and the young Indian woman, Lola (Katherine Ross) are in love, but Lola's father and brothers threaten Willie Boy to stay away. Lying naked together after a secret midnight tryst, the couple are ambushed and Willie Boy shoots Lola's father in self-defence. Willie takes Lola as his wife, according to tribal custom, and the couple go on the run together, perhaps in the vague hope of fulfilling Lola's dream of owning a ranch together and becoming a schoolteacher, but gradually coming to the realisation that they will be pursued to their deaths. Lola kills herself (or so it is implied – she is found in her wedding dress with a gun in her hand), in the hope that the posse, led by the relentless son of an Indian fighter, Sheriff Cooper (Robert Redford), will give up the chase. Cooper eventually corners Willie on a barren mountaintop; as the adversaries face each other for the first time, Willie goes for his rifle first and is shot by Cooper. Willie's rifle was empty. His body is burnt immediately, with Cooper refusing to provide "souvenirs" for the baying bounty hunters and press.

Tell The Willie Boy is Here offers two points of identification, Willie Boy and Sheriff Cooper, each offering a different perspective on the segregated society the film depicts. Unlike *A Man Called Horse*, *Little Big Man* and the ‘going native’ tradition generally, our understanding of Native Americans is not channelled through a white point of view, but rather the film is narrated by contrasting separate perspectives on the same events. The chase plot which keeps the two protagonists apart – Willie Boy and Cooper do not see each other until the final shootout – not only generates suspense, but also ensures that until the final stages of the pursuit, neither character has the authority to focalise our perspective on events. This means that while the film juxtaposes native and white American society – for instance, two social gatherings: the dusty and carefully marshalled fiesta on the reservation where various poor and ethnic minority groups dance and sell goods, and the opulent reception for President Taft held in a Victorian hotel festooned with stars and stripes – these contrasts are not as didactic or tonally marked as in *Little Big Man*, where two very different worlds only meet for the purposes of a historically inevitable (if lamentable) series of massacres. In *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here*, the two societies are complexly interconnected, segregated but not separate, and Native American society, while victimised and subjugated, is conceived in the present.

If the film’s closing images of smoke from Willie’s makeshift funeral pyre dissipating into the wilderness air are symbolically in tune with the ‘Vanishing American’ tradition, it is all the more a defeat for a character designed to resist the stereotypes of the Noble Savage. Willie Boy is an individualistic anti-hero, in J. Hoberman’s words, ‘a lone hippie rebel in the face of a violent racist world,’ unencumbered with being representative of Native Americans generally (2003:241). Indeed, Robert Blake’s brooding, laconic performance, and Willie’s repartee of pithy one-liners, make him much more reminiscent of Paul Newman in *Hud*, even Marlon Brando or James Dean’s iconic screen rebels, than he is of Old Lodge Skins or any other contemporary incarnations of the Noble Savage (it should be noted that Robert Blake is white, merely deeply tanned for the role – even the most avowedly progressive and revisionist westerns would not risk a Native American actor in a lead role). As Dan Georgakas states in his review ‘[Willie’s] Indianness is just a device. He could be black or a rebel white youth’ (1972:31). In the opening scene Willie is shown clinging to the outside of a boxcar of a moving freight train wearing a cowboy hat and jeans. Despite being nominally set in 1909 and

including such turn of the century bellwethers of consolidating modernity as the automobile (which naturally spews dirt in Willie's face as he walks to the reservation), as well as references to contemporary historical events (such as the recent assassination of President James A. Garfield, triggering inevitable associations with JFK), *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* is slightly anachronistic throughout. From the Kerouacian freight-hopping of the opening sequence (Fig. 25), to the cat and mouse duel in the sterile desert, the film alternates between a recognisable twentieth century setting, and a timeless natural space. This temporally unmoored space – located somewhere between the explicitly historical, anachronistic, contemporary, and universal – allows Polonsky to retrieve the Native American hero from the closed-off mythologised space of nineteenth century history and to explore the recent – and by implication, *continuing* – struggle – of the people described in the opening title card as “America's oldest minority.”

Perhaps counter-intuitively, in a film which demonstrates the corrosive effect of racist intolerance, and which depicts the objective inequality experienced by minority Americans, Polonsky dwells upon the similarities between Willie and Cooper, suggesting a kind of metaphysical bond between the pair. Throughout the film their parallel, yet never fully intersecting narrative arcs, mirror each other, complicating what might have been a morally oversimplified and pitying tale of an innocent Indian hounded out of existence by an aggressively intolerant white society. In fact, throughout the film Cooper displays a begrudging admiration and sympathy for Willie not shared by the bigoted townspeople, whose segregationist racism is suggested in an early scene in which Willie is provoked in a distinctly contemporary looking pool bar (“I’ll tell you what democracy is! You take that Indian over here: we let him come and go as he pleases just as if he still owned the country, just as if he were *white* and a *man*!”). The connection between Willie and Cooper is explicitly conveyed by cross-cutting between their midnight dates with their respective secret lovers. Polonsky contrasts Cooper and Elizabeth's mutually resentful affair with Willie and Lola's youthful and sensual encounter, but suggests, through Conrad Hall's bluish day-for-night cinematography and the simultaneity of both scenes, the impossibility for both Willie and Cooper to sustain meaningful romantic relationships in a broken society. Elizabeth, a doctor in charge of the reservation, patronisingly concerned for the welfare of “her Indians,” despises the coarseness and violence

engendered by Cooper's role as sheriff, while he similarly resents her haughtiness and hypocritical mingling with high society. Willie and Lola's relationship meanwhile is ill-fated from the beginning, in the tradition of *Romeo and Juliet*, by petty familial and racial divides. The similarity between these two relationships is reinforced in a later scene as the sound of Elizabeth's crying overlaps with Lola's, connecting two disparate realisations of relationships doomed, for different reasons, by external forces.

A curious scene towards the end of the film in which Willie attempts to steal a horse from a ranch, narrowly avoiding Cooper patrolling with his rifle, confirms the existence of a bond between the pair. Perched on top of a roof and peering through the branches of a tree, Willie trains his pistol on Cooper below, who scans the area, somehow sensing his presence, but never quite matching his eyeline. Within this wordless exchange of unreciprocated glances, it is symbolically significant that it is Willie who can see the connection that Cooper can only instinctively sense; he knows that the man who in different circumstances might have been his friend and equal, will hunt and kill him out of a sense of duty he cannot explain. The nature of their connection is soon revealed to be that for all their similarities, the two westerners are trapped within socially and historically determined roles that will inevitably lead to Willie Boy's death, and Cooper's loneliness and angst. In *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* the form of "backing off" is based not so much on conscious choice as on a fatalistic predestination. After the two protagonists shed their romantic entanglements they retreat further into the barren landscape, the difference between the pursued and the pursuer is rendered indistinguishable, with the pair spiralling around each other until they finally meet at a point in the middle (Fig. 26). Both men are doomed by their fathers, whose ghosts hang over the film. Cooper, against his will is forced to emulate his Indian fighter father, who, we are told, "died while it was still good to live." And Willie, who can no longer sustain his life as a wandering individualistic rebel, dons his father's ceremonial ghost shirt and runs into the wilderness, forced to play out his role as another Vanishing American.

Willie Boy as a character clearly cannot sustain any idea of Native Americans as authentic American heroes; he is too well adapted to modern life to conform to the Noble Savage, too taciturn and morally questionable to be a Hippie Indian. Instead his authenticity lies in his refusing to be a

representative figure, in his character flaws that allow him to consist of more than a didactic vehicle for ideas, and in his being an individualistic outsider from the perspective of both white and native societies. Yet, for all this, Polonsky insists, Willie is helpless to escape his predetermined role even in the wilderness; there can be no authenticity outside of history. Cooper may be victim to the same dilemma, but their fates are not equal. Here Polonsky's own experiences as an American outsider denied authenticity by historical circumstance, as a son of Russian Jewish immigrants and a 'card-carrying' Communist Party member blacklisted by HUAC, are relevant. In a 1980 interview with Joseph McBride to mark a re-release of the film, Polonsky reflected upon the parallels between the post-war period and the events in the film, paraphrasing a remark by screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, one of the Hollywood Ten, about there being "only victims" during the blacklist: '*Of course we're all victims of history. But we're all actors too. There are those victims who are victors and there are the victims who are those who are destroyed.*'¹⁰⁴ *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* permits us to identify with both sides of this historical dilemma, to understand Cooper and Willie's situation as interconnected, but not to dissolve their differences. Polonsky cannot permit the straightforward narcissistic projection of contemporary alienation and desires onto the native Other, of the kind Penn encourages in *Little Big Man*.

The sense of an individual's being damned by an older generation's sins, and a society of inescapable roles and futile action, played out to a depressing conclusion in *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here*, rankled Pauline Kael, who criticised in her review what she termed the film's 'programmed ideological negativism.' Kael wondered where this masochistic trend of American self-hatred in movies would lead:

At the movies this year, I've sometimes had the feeling that audiences respond so intensely and with such satisfaction to paranoid visions because they believe that America is collapsing and that they can't stop the apocalypse, so they might as well get it to happen sooner and get their fears confirmed and have it over with [...] And now there's a movie [*Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here*] that goes all the way – turning white Americans into a race carrying blood guilt, a race whose civilization must be destroyed.¹⁰⁵

What *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* lacks, Kael implies, is the tone of regret or rage that accompanies even the most excoriating visions of America in the Hollywood Renaissance and betrays a lingering patriotism; the aesthetic and affective appeal of the apocalypse – the “we blew it” remorse of *Easy Rider*, or the propulsive self-immolation of *The Wild Bunch* and *The Last Movie* – is substituted for a cool, languid defeatism.

All the films discussed in this chapter explore the possibility of American Authenticity, embodied in characters previously marginalised in western mythology, and projected onto impossible spaces outside of mainstream society and history. Whether Harry’s abandoned family home in *The Hired Hand*, the reveries of absolute wilderness in *Jeremiah Johnson*, the glimpse of countercultural utopia represented by the Cheyenne in *Little Big Man*, the self-rejuvenating tribal and natural ordeals of *Man in the Wilderness* and *A Man Called Horse*, or the scarcely believable possibility that Willie and Lola might escape their pursuers in *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here*, these unapproachable spaces of reconciliation and authenticity cannot be directly represented, but consist only in the diminishing hopes of their protagonists. Drawing upon the popular desire for nostalgic retreat, to step outside of history, society and ideology, might be interpreted as a retrograde step for the revisionist western. However, this chapter has demonstrated how *Jeremiah Johnson*, *Little Big Man* and *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* in particular, expose the contradictions and impossibility of the very alienated and homesick post-sixties mindset which they project onto the wilderness and social outsiders alike.



Fig. 18: *The Hired Hand* (1971)



Fig. 19: *Man In The Wilderness* (1971)



Fig. 20: *Man In The Wilderness* (1971)



Fig. 21: *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972)



Fig. 22: *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972)



Fig. 23: *Jeremiah Johnson*, (1972)



Fig. 24: "Sometimes the magic works. Sometimes it doesn't." *Little Big Man* (1970)



Fig. 25: *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* (1969)



Fig 26: *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* (1969)

Chapter Four:

Arenas of Authenticity

[...] Our past, whatever it was, was a past in the process of disintegration; we yearn to grasp it, but it is baseless and elusive; we look for something solid to lean on, only to find ourselves embracing ghosts. The modernism of the 1970s was a modernism with ghosts (Berman, 1983:333).

LEE: So ya' think there's room for a real life Western these days? A true-to-life Western? – Sam Shepherd, *True West* (1980).

“Are You a Real Cowboy?”

In September 1978 men's magazine *Esquire* ran a feature article by Aaron Latham titled 'The Ballad of the Urban Cowboy: America's Search for True Grit', reporting on the growing country and western scene in metropolitan Houston. This subculture of urban cowboys congregate in the ranch-sized honkytonk saloon Gilley's where, after a day's labouring in Pasadena's vast petrochemical industries, they swap their hard hats for cowboy hats and take turns riding a mechanical bull. In the oxymoronic image of the self-styled big city cowboy, clinging to a mechanised simulacrum of a mythologised cowboy lifestyle to which he has no connection or memory, Latham finds a metaphor for America undergoing, in Richard Slotkin's phrase, 'a crisis of public myth' (1992:624):

He lives in a world where machines have replaced every animal but himself, and he is threatened. In his boots and jeans, the urban cowboy tries to get a grip on and ride an America that, like his bull is mechanised. He can never tame it, but he has the illusion of doing so.¹⁰⁶

Latham's article recognises the continuing appeal of the cowboy code – a peculiar mix of conservative values and thrill-seeking rebelliousness – among working class men and women in the late 1970s, despite the strain and contradictions involved in sustaining an image now utterly detached

from socio-economic realities. In the inside cover of the same issue of *Esquire*, a double page advertisement for Marlboro Lights shows two gold jacketed riders on horseback speeding across a spectacular mountain range. Marlboro's successful marketing of cigarettes through the image of a mythic cowboy hero, the 'Marlboro Man', who guaranteed the existence of a mythic western landscape, 'Marlboro Country', available to those who smoke the right brand, continued throughout the 1970s. A few pages in, an advertorial from Time-Life for a subscription to an encyclopaedia of the Old West offers another form of vicarious escape to the '*real life* adventures' of the frontier, persuading readers that 'if you find the world even a little bit dull today you owe yourself a trip to the frontier'. Also included is an interview with fashion designer Ralph Lauren, who promotes a new line of western influenced designer clothing capturing "the classical romantic look of Gary Cooper."

On the basis of the 'Urban Cowboy' issue of *Esquire*, the commercial potential of western myth in the marketing of consumer products – attaching a sense of timelessness, originality and authenticity to ephemeral, mass-produced goods – which had been relentlessly exploited since the late nineteenth century, remained undiminished in the late 1970s. 'The cowboy hero has always been a commodity,' writes William Savage: 'he may be part of a mythic construct of America's past, and his image in popular culture may be rife with sociological and psychological implications, but he exists in the first place because of a superior act of marketing' (1979:109).

In the cinema, however, the marketability of the cowboy hero appeared to be severely on the wane. Pauline Kael had pronounced the western dead in 1974, adding that the cowboy hero had moved from the 'mythic purity of the wide-open spaces, into the corrupt modern cities and towns.'¹⁰⁷ Her prophesy, while theoretically and quantitatively overstated (the genre's popularity is not necessarily predicated on its being a carrier of national identity and if genres are to be conceived as having lifespans, they must be considered cyclical, not linear), was largely borne out over the latter half of the decade; the western boom of the Hollywood Renaissance was coming to an end. In 1978, for the second consecutive year, none of the handful of westerns produced featured in the top fifty of the annual domestic box office (Jack Nicholson's directorial debut *Goin' South* (1978) and Alan J. Pakula's *Comes a Horseman* (1978) are perhaps the only westerns of any note released during this period). While 1978 represents an unprecedented statistical nadir for the genre, 1976 perhaps

represents a more symbolic tipping point: John Wayne, ailing from cancer, bowed out in his final film *The Shootist*, while Renaissance auteurs Robert Altman and Arthur Penn both released their final revisionist experiments in the genre with *Buffalo Bill & the Indians, Or, Sitting Bull's History Lesson*, and *The Missouri Breaks* respectively. After *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), Clint Eastwood would not direct another traditional western until *Pale Rider* (1985), while *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid* (1973) would prove to be Sam Peckinpah's final work in the genre. The sudden decline of the western in the mid-1970s disproves structural linguistic models of generic evolution in the near-extinction of various classical, experimental, revisionist and parodic species of westerns simultaneously.

The causes underlying the abrupt marginalisation of America's foremost cinematic genre are multifarious and overdetermined, and the purpose of this chapter is not to perform another premature cultural autopsy but rather to explore how westerns continued to express, animate and problematize ideas of authenticity during a period in which the concept itself, the character of the region in which authenticity is traditionally located, and the cinematic form which had been its foremost vehicle, all endured destabilising and irreversible changes. A couple of factors are however worth rehearsing. First and foremost, the decline of the western corresponds closely to the marked – if gradual and far from absolute – eclipse of the Renaissance auteurs (whose relevance and creative vitality was either waning or squandered) by the resurgent studios' championing of the Lucas-Spielberg generation of fantasy blockbusters. The towering box office grosses of *Star Wars* (1977), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), and *Superman* (1978), signalled a public appetite for childlike wonderment and subjection, for resolution and reassurance, and for a retreat away from engagement with social and historical issues that characterised much of the Hollywood Renaissance.¹⁰⁸ As I argued in Chapter Two, the western is central to the Renaissance as a whole – exemplifying filmmakers' critical engagement with genre as a means to comment upon history and contemporary issues simultaneously in a covert yet highly readable form, while expressing their often ambivalent relation to the values enshrined in the genre – so it is perhaps inevitable that the shift in industrial conditions in the mid-seventies would see the genre, already in long-term decline, go the same way as the Renaissance.

Wider cultural and ideological causes for the decline of the western are considerably more vexed than industrial factors. Richard Slotkin argues that defeat in Vietnam, combined with the Arab

oil boycott, years of negligible economic growth, rising unemployment and inflation, threatened the status of the United States as the global economic and military superpower, and called into question its 'guiding myth' of the frontier (1992:624-6). Jimmy Carter complained in 1979 of a "crisis of confidence" that had struck "at the very heart and soul of our national will" in what became known as the 'malaise' speech delivered at a time of record low approval ratings¹⁰⁹ (Brinkley, 1993:876).

Whereas the western had traditionally been mobilized to provide affirmative resolution in times of national crisis, Slotkin finds that the 'malaise' of the late seventies, being predominantly cultural in character, could no longer be healed with the old 'ideologically symbolic language' of the western:

What has been lost is not the underlying myth but a particular set of historical references that tied a scenario of heroic action to a particular vision of American national history. The passing of the western may mark a significant revision of the surface signs and referents of our mythology, but it does not mark a change in the underlying system of ideology (1992:642).

In Slotkin's conception frontier mythology ceases to be anchored in an image of American history. Similarly, for Ryan and Kellner, the transition to a corporatist, technocratic and 'post-industrial' economy means that 'it is not appropriate or effective to portray a world of rugged individualist competition in a frontier setting that is an allegorical version of the capitalist marketplace' (1988:79). The themes and values that found continual expression in the western do not simply disappear; instead their cultural energy is dispersed throughout newer genres. The 'surface signs and referents' of frontier mythology in its traditional nineteenth century historical form may have been less apparent at the cinema from the mid-seventies, but elsewhere western motifs remained powerful and persuasive, from their use in advertising, to the political rhetoric and imagery of Ronald Reagan. As this chapter will demonstrate, far from abandoning the western as the privileged vehicle for the construction of authenticity, the seventies saw the genre interrogated, contested and reconstructed within itself.

The previous chapter considered how Hollywood Renaissance westerns produced in the perplexing and politically dispiriting aftermath of the turbulent sixties turned to alternative heroes, and enacted a politics of disaffected retreat from society as a means of conceiving and spatialising a form of American Authenticity befitting the temper of the seventies. This chapter turns to the cowboy

hero once again, specifically the cowboy hero relocated from the confines of a codified nineteenth century history to a vision of contemporary society. It is well established that the macho heroes of cop-thrillers and vigilante films of the 1970s like *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Death Wish* (1974) impose an excessive and reactionary version of violent justice, derived from frontier mythology, onto a paranoid vision of post-sixties America. Thomas Elsaesser argues that these ‘coldly determined’ conservative backlash figures vent their ‘destructive rage under the guise of a law and order morality’ as the reverse side of the ‘unmotivated hero’ (2004:283). Clint Eastwood’s Harry Callahan character might be seen as a ‘street cowboy’, in Kael’s terms, but his relation to the genre is largely associative; our appreciation of the film might be supplemented by, but certainly does not depend upon, its allusion morality in the western genre. This chapter focuses on a comparatively neglected relative of the conservative ‘street cowboy’, the rodeo cowboy, whose relation to the genre is considerably more marked and complex.

Throughout the 1970s, modern westerns featuring a variety of displaced urban cowboys both joined the western revival and somewhat bucked the decline of the genre in the latter half of the decade. In 1972 a spate of films including *When The Legends Die*, *The Honkers*, *Junior Bonner*, and *J.W. Coop* dramatized the dilemmas of rodeo cowboys, desperately clinging to and attempting to revive the skills of the Old West, as they navigate a rapidly changing modern region. These were followed towards the end of the decade by *The Electric Horseman* (1979), *Broncho Billy* (1980), and *Urban Cowboy* (1980) in which the anachronistic modern cowboy self-consciously performs the western against the currents of a region transformed by changes anticipated by the earlier rodeo films.

In *Urban Cowboy*, a quasi-musical adaptation of Aaron Latham’s *Esquire* article, Sissy (Deborah Winger), a competitive honkytonk cowgirl who holds her own with the best men riding the mechanical bull, asks a question central to the modern western: As she approaches Bud (John Travolta), who poses at the bar newly bedecked in designer western gear, she asks flirtatiously, “Are you a *real* cowboy?” In the closed-off world of Gilley’s bar, a ‘real’ cowboy is one who wears the right clothes, who can dance country and western-style, who can hit the punch-bag hardest, and who can hang onto a bucking mechanised saddle the longest. Bud proves himself a ‘real’ cowboy on these terms, but Sissy’s question hints at an irony neither she, nor the film fully realise; the criteria of the

urban cowboy's authenticity are affectation, artifice, performance, and conformist consumption; traditional markers of *inauthenticity* and terms antithetical to the traditional cowboy hero in American mythology. The bull he rides is a mechanical, inorganic, and commercial simulation of rodeo entertainment which itself is an attempt to conserve the skills and lifestyle of actual cowboys; an imitation of an echo. Sustaining the concept of American Authenticity, embodied in the cowboy hero, has always involved performance, artifice, and commercial exploitation, but in Bud, the urban cowboy, these qualities become, perversely, the criteria of authenticity itself. "That depends on what you think a real cowboy is," Bud replies to Sissy. As the pair dance, the camera glides around the dancefloor, craning upwards to reveal the seemingly limitless bar, hazy with smoke and lit with lurid neon and moody spotlights, awash with two-stepping cowboys and cowgirls. In *Urban Cowboy*, an entire population has become, by simple appropriation and total ignorance of contradiction, something which had up to that point been understood as an irreconcilable problem or impossible ideal in American culture. In this sense, Bud and Sissy anticipate and illustrate then-emerging postmodernist ideas, exemplified by Jean Baudrillard, about subjectivity constituted by the appropriation and play of images, symbols and simulacra increasingly cut-off from material reality (1994). John Travolta as Bud stands as the ideal postmodern cowboy, and Gilley's as the archetypal hyperreal West – to continue borrowing postmodernist vocabulary – where 'the territory no longer precedes the map' (Baudrillard, 1994:1), a space cut off from history, where concepts like alienation have no purchase.

At the end of the film Bud proves himself a 'real' cowboy by winning the bar's rodeo contest and winning back Sissy from his rival Wes, a convict and former rodeo star with whom Sissy has an abusive affair. Through spectacles of mechanical bull riding and country and western dancing (and one fistfight), *Urban Cowboy* dispels the contradictions and ironies of cowboy mythology continuing to offer a source of identity and values in an industrialized landscape (gender anxieties, suggested by Sissy challenging Bud on the mechanical bull, albeit in an eroticised manner, and keeping her job as a mechanic after marriage, are neatly allayed too, as she is violently punished for her tomboyishness by Wes and rescued by Bud).¹¹⁰ Fissures in this restorative narrative are nonetheless present throughout the film. Shortly after their marriage Bud and Sissy attend a prison rodeo, where Bud expresses his admiration for the prisoners' bravery riding an actual bull ("Damn, those outlaws make good

cowboys”). Later, Bud goes to a ranch with his uncle to train on a mechanical bull – in one of the few scenes in the film that takes place away from Gilley’s, the trailer park or the labyrinthine oil refinery – as the cows and old farm hands look on, equally perplexed. Both scenes suggest the presence of a faint connection between the lifestyle of the Old West, via the rodeo, to the hyperreal West of Gilley’s nightclub, but rather than use the rodeo as a means to enter into a dying vestige of the past – as the heroes of the seventies rodeo film variously attempt – which is also a form of incarceration, Bud is content to affect a new cowboy identity which, however debased it might appear, is relatively youthful, vital and optimistic; more ‘real’ for those living it, and preferable to clinging to an unobtainable and unpalatable image of the past.

John Travolta as Bud is a cowboy perfectly adapted to the coming Reagan era. Ronald Reagan similarly affected his cowboy persona, in a carefully constructed political performance based on his time as a B-movie actor for Warner, which embodied ‘the loss or blurring of distinctions between fiction and history, ideology and fact’ (Prince, 1992:16) in an era which saw Hollywood and politics flow freely into one another.¹¹¹ The lack of substance to Reagan’s reengineered cowboy image, Slotkin argues, was precisely the source of its appeal and usefulness. In his ‘recrudescence and revision of the frontier myth,’ Reagan realised that ‘the myths produced by mass culture have become creditable substitutes for actual historical or political action in authenticating the character and ideological claims of political leaders’ (Slotkin, 1992:644). The revived frontier myth went further than simply providing popular and identifiable imagery and political rhetoric for an electoral campaign; the frontier myth ideologically bound together the key policies of the administration: deregulated markets promising bonanza economics in a post-industrial landscape, stark moral oppositions of good and evil justifying an escalated Cold War and associated counter-insurgencies, and the cutting of federal spending (military excepted) drawing upon traditional suspicion of large interfering government.

The frontier past that Reagan invoked is not easily located historically. Reagan’s America is a streamlined and highly symbolic revision of Turnerian frontier values, projected onto an iridescent vision of fifties small town picket-fence society, and draped over the complex set of economic and social issues of the 1980s. Most importantly, it is a past which rolls back recent history, undoing the

malaise of the seventies and the trauma of the late sixties. As Stephen Prince puts it, ‘The Reagan ‘revolution’ was an attempt to turn back the clock to a mythical and more pristine America, to a time when traditional authority was not challenged by oppositional racial, sexual, political, or economic interests’ (1992:32). Reagan’s appeal rested upon, Garry Wills writes, ‘the great joint confession that we cannot live with our real past, that we not only prefer but need a substitute’ (1987:386). Nostalgia for illusory pasts is nothing new. What distinguishes Reaganite nostalgia is the insistence, more still the belief, that a past with no substance in history can be conjured in reality out of sheer will. “Why would we ever want to return to where we were?” asked the famous “Morning in America” television campaign adverts in 1984. Reagan’s America effectively solves the problem of American Authenticity by dehistoricising it; no longer irretrievably located in verifiable history, the real thing can be brought into the present as easily as Bud dons his cowboy gear in *Urban Cowboy*. The struggle, mourning and rage that characterised the attempts of Hollywood Renaissance westerns to interrogate and come to terms with history while salvaging something as the basis for overcoming contemporary dilemmas, is therefore placated and reconciled in the wilfully ahistorical postmodern cowboy.

“Today the West is Everywhere”

In *America*, Jean Baudrillard’s critical and awestruck account of a road trip across the states in the mid-eighties, he observes that ‘[Reagan] has worked up his euphoric, cinematic, extraverted, advertising vision of the artificial paradises of the West to all-American dimensions’ (2010:118). The economic and military superiority of the United States might have been challenged in previous decades, but Baudrillard sees a compensatory rejuvenation of the nation’s political and cultural power; the United States, refashioned as a pervasive and utopian New West. Such impressions confirm what the last Marlboro television advertisement in 1970 stated, that “Today, the West is everywhere,” the region apparently having seceded from history into a purely imaginative and ideological realm.¹¹² Sam Shepherd’s play *True West*, first performed in 1980, captures this crisis of the meaning and location of the ‘real’ West, in a feud between two estranged brothers, arguing over

an idea for a new western in the kitchen of a suburban house located somewhere between Los Angeles and the Mojave Desert. Austin, an Ivy League educated screenwriter is working on a 'period piece' (i.e. not a western, but a costume drama set in the historic West) for a stereotypically crass Hollywood producer named Saul. His brother Lee, a deadbeat petty criminal, attempts to hijack Austin's deal with Saul with his own idea for a 'true-to-life' contemporary western, inspired by foggy memories of *Lonely Are The Brave*. Saul decides he wants Austin to write Lee's contrived chase movie ("the first authentic western to come along in a decade," Lee boasts) instead of his 'period piece,' sending Austin into a self-destructive rage as the brothers begin to swap roles. For Austin the real West is a landscape of shopping malls and smog choked freeways, not the "grown men acting like boys" in Lee's story, eventually shouting at Saul, "There's no such thing as the West anymore! It's a dead issue! It's dried up, Saul, and so are you." In *True West*, Neil Campbell writes, 'there is no single truth, only people living in the landscape and creating their own New West, not as a 'dead issue', but as a complex postmodern construction, real and mythic, city suburbs, small towns, and desert' (2000:130).

The story of western literature, according to Thomas J. Lyon, in terms equally applicable to western cinema, is 'the story of two Wests', in short the mythic and the real, 'the one immediately and deeply persuasive' and 'the second more complex in its intentions and its effects' (1999:3). The meaning of the West in cinema typically derives from the correspondence between these two symbiotically connected Wests, between a mythic past and life in the historical present, and it is between these two mutable and elastically bonded regions that American Authenticity can be projected. The decline of the western and the emergence of the 'everywhere West', the pervasive dehistoricised postmodern New West of Reagan's America, can be understood as the result of dramatic and destabilising historical changes climaxing in the 1970s in the real West, severing the bond or scrambling the correspondence with the mythic West. The rodeo cowboy is an ideal character with whom to chart this process, as a quintessentially seventies figure who stands caught between the two Wests being pulled intractably apart.

The 1970s saw the intensification or climax of economic and political trends that fundamentally altered the image of the West. Quite suddenly, the region could no longer sustain its

image as a sparse, depopulated, marginal, subjugated, and backwards space; the West had entered the mainstream of American life. The three decades since World War Two saw ‘the gradual demise throughout most of the region of the West’s old ‘colonial’ subservience to the East and its rise to a position of national economic equality’ (Malone and Etulain, 1989:219). The post-war years saw a rise, driven initially by federal military investment, in the population, wealth and political power of the so-called Sunbelt states. By the seventies these trends had accelerated to the point that commentators began to notice that the demographic, economic, and political centre of gravity in the United States had swung towards the southwest. Bruce Schulman writes, quoting a contemporary piece in the *New York Times* on the emerging regional conflict that, ‘as the United States approached its bicentennial, ‘a restless and historic movement’ shifted people and power away from the northern states that had dominated American life since the nation’s birth’ (2001:106). With this movement of capital and employment from the northern states, Mike Davis states, ‘the seventies witnessed the most rapid and large-scale shift in economic power in American history,’ which in turn furnished the conditions for the rise of the New Right in American politics (2000:171).

The migration of people, wealth and power towards the Sunbelt states can be mapped using the movement of the mean centre of the U.S. population across the continent. Between 1970 and 1980, the centre of population moves further across the continent than it had at any point since the decades following the Gold Rush in the nineteenth century (Fig. B). Dipping decisively towards the southwest, the centre point of the U.S. population leaves Illinois and crosses the Mississippi River into Missouri, finally arriving in the West after nearly two centuries of migration. There is, if not a direct causal connection, a poetic coincidence, to the real West finally entering the mainstream of American life just as the imaginative West in its traditional form is quite suddenly vacated by Hollywood, once its foremost promoter. The ‘two Wests’, in Thomas J. Lyons’s terms, had never been further apart.

Some of these historic shifts are represented succinctly in the opening credit sequence of *Urban Cowboy*, in which Bud first leaves home to find work with his uncle. A timeless establishing shot shows a rustic house surrounded by farmland and bathed in early morning light. Bud runs down the stairs and, spurning offers of breakfast, jumps into his souped-up truck (the first clue to the film’s

contemporary setting). As he speeds off down a dirt road, glancing nervously over his shoulder at his suffocating family waving him off, the camera pans across a field of crops stretching out to the horizon. The receding rows of crops are then juxtaposed with a graphic match cut to the painted lines of highway tarmac peeling underneath the truck. With this cut Bud is jolted from the god-fearing agrarian small town of Spur into an industrialised West, impelled by a propulsive western swing song glorifying the state of Texas. Agriculture declined steeply in the late 1970s and the traditional ‘family farm’ of western tradition was increasingly being replaced by large vertically integrated corporate farms (Malone and Etulain, 1989:241). Bud leaves the agricultural West of the past and, in a spiralling aerial shot of a snaking interstate highway recalling the epilogue of *How The West Was Won*, arrives at the West of the future as the helicopter shot pulls away to reveal the skyline of downtown Houston (Fig. 27). Circling the core of gleaming skyscrapers, Bud gawks at the edifice of a New West fuelled by federal investment, home to corporate headquarters and financial institutions, and opened out to a global marketplace.

The West exists in the popular imagination as the nation’s most rural and empty region, despite in fact being its most densely urbanised. As Carl Abbott writes, ‘Americans have a powerful desire to disjoin the western past and future, defining the real West as the empty West’ (1993:164). As its once imposing spaces became easy to bypass by interstate highway or jet travel, the West could no longer be defined by isolation and distance. By 1970, 83 percent of the people in the Mountain and Pacific Coast states lived in metropolitan areas (White, 1991:541). In fact, by 1980 people living in the West were more likely to live in metropolitan areas than those living elsewhere in the United States.¹¹³ More than ever the real West was an urban West. ‘Since the days of Frederick Jackson Turner,’ Abbott writes, Western historians have found it difficult to factor cities into their interpretations’ (1993:164). In westerns too, Barry Langford writes, cities ‘enjoy a mixed reputation’ largely functioning as ‘off-screen presences, railheads, unreached destinations, points of pioneer departure or cultural reference’ and ‘the inclusion of an actual cityscape is a cast-iron guarantee of revisionist intent’ (2005:64).

The rodeo western acknowledges the changing geography of a West increasingly dominated by sprawling cities, but unlike Harry Callahan in San Francisco, the rodeo cowboy is not habituated to

urban environments. The rodeo cowboy roams the hinterlands generated by several decades of uninterrupted economic growth and urbanisation: run-down small towns, anonymous suburbs, environments transformed by industry, landscapes bisected by highways and pock-marked with signs. The landscapes of the New West in the rodeo western reflect contemporary movements in western landscape photography which Mike Davis describes as launching a ‘full frontal attack on the hegemony of Ansel Adams, the dead pope of ‘Sierra Club School of Nature-as-God photography’ by acknowledging environmental and social changes:

Their West, by contrast, is an irrevocably social landscape, transformed by militarism, urbanisation, the interstate highway, epidemic vandalism, mass tourism and the extractive industries’ boom-and-bust cycles. Even in the ‘last wild places’, the remote ranges and lost box canyons, the Pentagon’s jets are always overhead (1993).

Returning to the opening sequence of *Urban Cowboy*, Bud fittingly avoids the high-rise centre of Houston and heads towards its heavily industrialised outskirts where a skyline of smokestacks, oil silos, gas holders and pipelines overlook newly-built suburban housing. This transition from family farm to the scene described by Aaron Latham as ‘one of the most denatured landscapes on the face of the earth,’ is not however represented as destructive or traumatic.¹¹⁴ Smoothly stitched together by the movement of Bud’s truck and the soundtrack, the rural and the urban-industrial West are rendered as two parallel worlds, both “a mighty fine place to be” according to the song, both noisily insisting on their incontrovertible Texan spirit.

Much like Bud’s status as a ‘real cowboy’, *Urban Cowboy*’s treatment of dramatic environmental change in the West is strangely blank and matter of fact. Ironies and contradictions are hinted at but rarely developed. For instance, midway through the film, Bud has an affair with Pam, a wealthy daughter of an oil tycoon (“Daddy does oil, and all that implies”) with a professed attraction to cowboys. Gazing over a panoramic view of the twinkling city from her high-rise luxury apartment, Pam says to Bud that Houston is her “favourite city in the whole world – it’s just got so much energy” before proposing a toast to cowboys (“and all that implies”). In Pam’s celebration of Houston as a city in which both Yuppie and working class cowboy lifestyles co-exist there is a slight pun: the backdrop of *Urban Cowboy* is built quite literally on energy, as America’s oil capital, unsustainably benefitting

from escalating domestic demand following the recent OPEC crisis.¹¹⁵ The following morning as Bud leaves Pam's bedroom to a regretful guitar melody, pours himself a drink, and self-consciously puts on his hat with a flourish (Fig. 28). With the cowboy silhouetted against the morning light dawning across the financial heart of the city, there is perhaps the suggestion of the superficial emptiness of the milieu of 'cowboy capitalism' that has lured Bud away from the hyperreal yet vital world of Gilley's, but like much of *Urban Cowboy*, any critique operates on the faintest level of implication.

The blankness of *Urban Cowboy* – that is, the film's manner of perceptively representing environmental and economic changes without commenting on these changes – is engendered largely by having Bud as the central point of identification. Whereas the seventies rodeo western focalises our perspective on the contemporary West through typically middle-aged characters who straddle an historical divide, Bud is a young and naïve participant in the historical development of the West which, in Houston circa 1980 had seemingly reached its apotheosis. Towards the end of the film Bud witnesses his uncle Bob die in an inferno while working at the refinery during a thunderstorm. At the wake Bud steps out into the bare fenced-off suburban yard and gazes out onto the brutal industrial landscape which killed his uncle (where Bud too suffers an industrial accident earlier in the film). From Bud's point of view the camera pans slowly across a scene illustrative of Latham's oxymoronic description of Pasadena as a 'petrochemical pastoral'¹¹⁶ landscape, with the refinery skyline in the background encroaching on a narrow strip of grass under leaden clouds and a nest of power lines (Fig. 29). To the doleful whine of pedal steel guitar, Bud receives his inheritance: a tarnished silver belt-buckle from his uncle's 'real' rodeo days, dated 1964. Yet for all the thematic, symbolic and affective ingredients loaded into this short scene, Bud is unable to pull these elements together and articulate any sort of message: no mourning uncle Bob's unfulfilled rodeo dreams, no comment about the disposable status of workers in a hazardous industry, no decrying a spoiled environment; Bud simply wonders if he can steel himself to wear his uncle's belt buckle at Gilley's rodeo that night. Of course, he does, and thereby the ironies and contradictions opened up by his uncle's death are folded into a restorative ending which sees Bud prove himself a 'real cowboy' on new dehistoricised terms.

Through layers of representational humus, post-westerns assert an archaeological probing into foundations forgotten, repressed, or built over (Campbell, 2013:26).

It was because Peckinpah occupied his own frontier, torn between the romantic tradition of the classical form and the sensibility of a modernist, that he was able to turn the form on its axis, inflecting the genre with great originality and force to reflect the turmoil and divisions of a new era (Kitses, 2004:240).

Urban Cowboy, while not a western by conventional definition, depends upon a background dialogue with the classical genre for its full depth of meaning. It is a western twice removed, looking back from the perspective of a transformed New West to the milieu of the rodeo, itself an echo of the Old West. This implicit dialogue with the western in rodeo films effectively illustrates Noël Carroll's concept of allusion as 'the major expressive device which distinguishes seventies film culture' (1982:52-3).

Rodeo films do not allude to the western in the sense of referring explicitly to specific filmmakers, films or shots (rodeo cowboys do not, unlike say the petty gangsters of *Mean Streets* (1973), duck into the movie theatres to catch a John Wayne movie, for this would cast their inadequacy and fantasy into sharp relief), but rather they have what Carroll calls 'discursive implications' by referring to genres that have 'a large body of established meanings, by using genre itself as a symbol' (1982:60).

Referring to the western only in a pervasive, generalised and symbolic way, rodeo films are able to explore the codes, values or morality of the genre in a contemporary setting. Put differently, rodeo films allude to the western not to acknowledge the widening gulf between the 'two Wests', but as a recognition of a crisis of genre and society simultaneously, and a doomed striving to bring the western back home to the present.

The short-lived cycle of rodeo films released in 1972 all bear their generic relation to the traditional western more openly than *Urban Cowboy*. The rodeo western introduces a range of new

semantic elements associated not with the historical frontier, but with the postmodern New West, yet maintains recognisable, albeit slightly strained syntactic relationships between these elements derived from the classical western.¹¹⁷ The abiding problem of authenticity in the seventies therefore finds its formal expression in the genericity of a cycle of modern westerns; our appreciation of these films depends upon the recognition that the dilemma of the rodeo cowboy is contained within the greater strain of maintaining the same syntactic relationships in a transformed setting.

J.W. Coop, The Honkers, Junior Bonner, and When The Legends Die, four remarkably similar films in terms of plot and setting, were all released in the same calendar year, representing perhaps the most complete and succinct sub-generic cycle of the period. All four films feature middle-aged rodeo cowboys characterised by world-weariness, physical and psychological trauma, and a marked sense of alienation from contemporary society. The milieu of the rodeo functions as a metonym for the historical and mythic frontier, and its increasingly isolated, decaying, or absurd presence in the New West. Fractured families, absent fathers, spoiled environments, and the impossibility of maintaining old ideals in irrevocably changed times are themes common to all four films.

A *Variety* magazine feature published in 1972 commented upon the sudden emergence and relative commercial failure of the rodeo western (the article includes *Black Rodeo* – a documentary about contemporary rodeo the role of African Americans in the historical West, shot mainly in Madison Square Garden, narrated by Woody Strode, and featuring a horseback cameo by Muhammed Ali – and *Pocket Money*, a modern western about cattle herding starring Paul Newman and Lee Marvin, but excludes *When The Legends Die*, which was released later in the year). The article explains, in characteristic jargon, the unpopularity of the films as a symptom of their association with the western genre then thought (correctly, if slightly prematurely) to be in decline:

Westerns, which over a 69-year span have been an ebb and flow commodity in audience popularity, are currently choking on a yawn. Just as no western made significant b.o. inroads in the early 1930s, so the largely false frontier fiction is not connecting to the current entertainment reactions of a young-plus-ethnic public.¹¹⁸

The only commercially successful ‘film oaters’ in the early seventies, the article notes, either starred John Wayne, or ‘have been mergers between current socio-political consciousness and the prairie

landscapes.’¹¹⁹ The modern western, *Variety* argues, represents a failed attempt on the part of filmmakers to reinvent the increasingly unpopular genre, not for its traditional conservative heartland audience, but for the fickle interests of a younger audience: ‘[...] audiences do not care about the passing of the western hero. For contemporary filmgoers these men figures are ‘losers,’ doomed men whose inability to adapt to changing conditions reduces sympathy for their plight.’¹²⁰

Phillip French, writing for a popular readership in the seventies, sees the rodeo film as a climactic moment in the sub-genre of the ‘post-western’ which he defines as a body of films which confront the coming of a ‘deadening mass society’ pervaded by ‘dehumanised technology,’ and reflecting ‘current feeling about the shortcomings and blindness of our overmechanized, polluted, unbalanced, disintegrating environment’ (1973:139). Borden and Essman expand upon the concept, defining the ‘post western’ as presenting ‘a dystopic vision of both the past and the present [...] both an echo of its engendering aesthetic and a critical inquiry in the ‘fictions’ of American history’ (2000:36). In keeping with the revisionist western of the Hollywood Renaissance more generally, the rodeo western does not advocate any blind nostalgia for American history; the rodeo cowboy is historically homeless, with few illusions about the past and fewer hopes still for the future. The dilemma of the rodeo cowboy is thus coming to terms with the past, salvaging aspects of western myth based on that past, and attempting to reimagine western authenticity for the future. This process, David M. Wrobel reminds us, is not unique to the rodeo western or the seventies, but integral to the continual development and recreation of the West over the centuries: ‘the ghosts of western future and past still haunt the western present’ (2002:181).

Neil Campbell sees the post-western as an inherently post-war phenomenon, finding in the genre’s reorientation to contemporary settings of visible social and political change, notably in *The Lusty Men* (1952) and *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955), a corollary of Deleuze’s conception of the shift from movement image to time image or ‘a cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent’ (2005:2). Campbell deploys the same Dickensian metaphor as Wrobel as he introduces his book on the ‘post-western’ as the study of the ‘phantom architecture’ of the West imagined through its cinematic representation (its ‘ghost westerns’) to understand how in the post-West there might live on the haunting presence of the past within the present and the future’ (2013:2). These haunted and troubled

texts are about ‘the West viewed no longer as an ideal, prelapsarian community or a clear register of national identity or imperial desire, but rather as complex and awkward meanderings into a layered, scarred region, both geographical and psychical’ (Campbell, 2013:15). The rodeo cycle of the seventies is not however a straightforward continuation of the haunted ‘post-western’ from *The Lusty Men*, through *Lonely Are The Brave*, *Hud*, *The Misfits* and *The Last Picture Show*, all of which examine the decaying remnants of frontier mythology in austere, depopulated and rural, or small town settings. Instead, the seventies rodeo western needs to be understood, like the Mountain Man or Hippie Indian cycles, in the context of the popular counterculture and the aftermath of the 1960s in which western myth was briefly revived.

In the epigraph to this chapter, Marshall Berman, in his 1983 work on the experience of modernity in the twentieth century, uses the idea of haunting as an analogy for the way in which the modernisms of the 1970s, responding to rapid destructive change to urban environments, were defined by remembering and uncovering old social and cultural forms:

Many modernisms have found themselves by forgetting; the modernists of the 1970s were forced to find themselves by remembering. Earlier modernisms wiped away the past in order to reach a new departure; the new departures of the 1970s lay in attempts to recover past modes of life that were buried but not dead (1983:332).

This is what distinguishes the ‘post-western’ ‘hauntologies’ of the seventies from the post-war era: American Authenticity is not so much mourned – as it is in *Lonely are the Brave* – but rather conceived as a haunting presence within the present, a quality ‘buried but not dead’, which the rodeo cowboy attempts to excavate and revive. The rodeo cowboy is not, unlike the archetypal cowboy hero in the classical western, the embodiment of American Authenticity, but rather the embodiment of its *pursuit* in the 1970s. The rodeo cowboy is what Michael Allen calls ‘a contemporary ancestor’ (1998:40), a homeless outsider in the present, who attempts to restore – through his transient lifestyle and thrill-seeking performances – a connection with a scarcely verifiable mode of life of which he has no memory, but whose traditions he is nonetheless duty-bound to uphold. As the embodiment of the pursuit of authenticity located neither in the past, present or future, the haunted figure of the rodeo cowboy is characterised with none of the wholeness, confidence or determination of his cowboy hero

ancestors; the rodeo cowboy is typically physically and psychologically scarred, haunted by a past he may or may not have directly experienced.

Before examining the rodeo cowboy of the 1970s 'post-western' as a countercultural hero and beleaguered vector for notions of authenticity, it is worth considering how poorly qualified he is for such a role. Rodeo (from the Spanish *rodear*: to go round or round up) was not known as such until the twentieth century, originating in the public demonstration of Latin and Anglo-American cowboy traditions which became formalised by the 1880s, with the growth of the sport inversely proportional to the practical utility of the skills exhibited.¹²¹ Rodeo's reputation as the sole surviving link to the frontier past is therefore largely a construction. As Savage points out, 'the rodeo performer is a contrivance of the twentieth century, and the promoters responsible for his keep would have it believed that he is a cowboy. But he is not' (1979:123). In fact, the rodeo performer has more in common with professional athletes in baseball, basketball, football, or any other major American spectator sport than he does with the nineteenth century cowboy whose costume he wears for the benefit of a paying crowd.

The rodeo cowboy's countercultural credentials are also not immediately apparent. The sport conjures images of patriotic conservatism in rural America more readily than it does the more oppositional and youthful culture of hippies. However, despite its outward appearance, the world of rodeo aspires, like the counterculture of the late sixties and early seventies, to remain apart from society as a whole and to maintain distinct customs, culture and morality (Wooden and Ehringer, 1996:3). The backward looking, oppositional, subcultural and transient aspects of rodeo life made it fitting subject matter for appropriation in the early seventies. Michael Allen argues that 'artists portrayals of rodeo cowboys in popular culture show the complex ways in which the myth of the West and the cowboy code were utilised' during the period, and proving 'that generalisations about the 'radical' and 'leftist' nature of the 1960s counterculture break down under close inspection' (2005:276). Indeed, the use of the rodeo cowboy as countercultural imagery epitomises the ideological ambiguity underpinning the counterculture's appropriation of western myth, as I argued in Chapter Two.

The existential bond between the apparently contrasting worlds of competitive rodeo and hippie counterculture are addressed explicitly in *J.W. Coop*, directed by and starring Cliff Robertson, about a slightly over-the-hill rodeo cowboy attempting to restart his career after nearly ten years in prison for attempting to pass a bad cheque and beating up a sheriff. Having been incarcerated since the early 1960s, J.W. emerges into a transformed society and gradually acclimatises to the new zeitgeist, making him a somewhat naïve point of identification, but also one uniquely positioned to bypass the generational and ideological resentment accumulated during the traumatic late-sixties. For instance, leaving prison he boards a bus in a small Texan town to find the black passengers crowded in the front seats and the white passengers at the back. Seemingly unmoved by this sign of a society radically changed, yet still fundamentally divided, he simply takes his seat as an outsider among the empty rows in the middle. J.W.'s innocence of the issue of racial conflict is reiterated later as he encourages a black rodeo cowboy (Myrtis Dightman, playing himself) to drink with him at a roadside bar and in doing so provokes a group of bigoted local thugs straight out of *Easy Rider*.

After arriving back in his home town, J.W.'s friend Hector brings him up to date with all that has changed in town over the past decade, including the emergence of Chicanos in local politics, the tightening of border controls and the rise of drug trafficking to meet the soaring demand for pot. "Sonofabitch, you've been away a long time," Hector wryly drawls, "lots of things have changed"; a refrain epitomising the sense of historical vertigo that accompanied perspectives on the 1960s from the remove of the 1970s. The realisation that "things have changed," emphasised by the narrative conceit of incarceration in *J.W. Coop*, is a thematic hallmark of the rodeo western and the 'post-western' more generally. This transition from the urgent, emotionally heightened sense of historical change happening in the present at the height of the sixties, to the typically more melancholic or beleaguered realisation of change having already happened in the seventies, is key to understanding the changing tenor of the pursuit of authenticity in westerns. The manner in which the tense of historical change slips from present to past in the early seventies is articulated in Sam Peckinpah's westerns by the shift from Pike Bishop's belated sense that "those days are closing fast" in *The Wild Bunch*, to Pat Garrett's confession of compromise, "it feels like times have changed" in *Pat Garrett &*

Billy the Kid, as the outlaw-turned-sheriff warns his old partner Billy, who is obstinately unwilling to change along with the times, to leave the country.

Forced to abandon his car by bullying and corrupt local law enforcement, J.W. hitchhikes between rodeo competitions and realises the extent to which the country has changed, as two truck drivers air their respective grievances about the state of the nation to the supposedly sympathetic ear of a wandering cowboy. In the film's rather blunt representation of the contradictory 'false consciousness' of an older generation, a pig farmer complains about "the kids, the commies and the unions," trying to ruin the country, before recalling how he established himself shipbuilding in the war economy ("Which one? Why all three of them!") thanks to the support of a "good union." Another trucker driving an oil tanker and coveting luxury motorboats similarly rants about "the kids and the commies," before praising the work of the union leader Jimmy Hoffa, then imprisoned for connections to organised crime. Hounded by police and having nothing in common with his generation, J.W. reaches a literal and symbolic crossroads in the desert where an alternative presents itself in the form of a young poncho-wearing hippie woman hitchhiking West in search of self-realising experiences. As the pair become romantically involved, J.W. and Bean (nicknamed after her vegetarian diet), begin to realise their similarities: "You'll make a hippie out of me yet," says J.W. as they bed down by a campfire on the grassy banks of a woodland stream (Fig. 30).

Between Bean's wandering countercultural lifestyle and the beer-swilling badinage of the rodeo, which the couple follow in an old army ambulance redecorated as a hippie caravan, J.W. briefly achieves a kind of generational reconciliation on the shared ground of escapist retreat into an imagined West. However, outside of J.W.'s ageing friends in a travelling rodeo troupe headed by the Calamity Jane-esque matriarch, Big Marge, he finds the world of rodeo has become corrupted by the trappings of an entertainment industry: lucrative endorsements, intensive schedules demanding flights between competitions, decadent parties hosted by businessmen, and playing for points rather than the thrill of performance (in essence rodeo is revealed to be what it always was, a commercial sport). In a patently obvious analogy for consumerist greed, J.W. develops a pathological drive to beat his rivals to the national finals and to earn enough prize money to "buy the dream". Bean leaves him, ending his association with the counterculture, and at the national finals J.W. is sacrificed in order to hammer

home the point about the inevitable corruption of the fragile dreams shared by wandering hippies and rodeo cowboys alike. J.W. is brutally gored by a particularly fearsome bull and the film ends with a close up on his bloodied face and his hands clutching his champion's belt in what we assume are his final moments, before the camera zooms out to reveal his body crumpled insignificantly at the edge of the arena in Madison Square Garden. The unequivocally depressing ending of *J.W. Coop*, somewhat forced onto an otherwise fairly restrained and light-hearted film, is an attempt to deny any realistic possibility of achieving an authentic mode of existence in irreversibly changed times; yet this fashionably cynical posture betrays a deeper desire to find new forms in which western myth might be kept alive.

Sam Peckinpah's contribution to the rodeo western cycle, *Junior Bonner*, like *J.W. Coop*, explores the prospects for western authenticity through a middle-aged rodeo cowboy (Steve McQueen) returning to a radically changed hometown and looking to defy his obsolescence by winning one last competition. The credit sequence of *Junior Bonner* succinctly introduces Junior as a typically haunted 'post-western' protagonist; wandering, impoverished, traumatised, and historically homeless. Expressively deploying a variety of optical effects including wipes and freeze frames within a split-widescreen montage sequence, Peckinpah alternates between scenes of Junior packing up after a rodeo competition and sepia-toned flashbacks of him being violently thrown from Old Sunshine (a mean brahma bull who is perhaps the sole antagonist in a rare film by 'Bloody Sam' without a single death or gunshot fired in anger). As Junior wearily walks towards the camera in a long shot of an empty stable, footage of him mounting the bull appears in the lower-left quadrant, before expanding to fill the rest of the screen. This footage is then frozen as the title appears before a close-up of Junior's feet walking through the stable to collect his horse reappears in the lower half of the frame. The lower image then wipes upwards as the camera tilts to reveal Junior's tired and preoccupied expression, before footage of the bull surging out of the pen fills the screen and freezes. Junior arrives at his car and trailer in the lower-right quadrant, and this too expands to fill the screen but not for long, as another wipe brings us back to the footage of Junior being thrown from the bull.

This pattern of unpredictable alternation between past and present continues throughout the remainder of the sequence as Junior is shown strapping up an injury to his ribs, loading up his horse

and heading back out onto the road. Once the slow-motion footage of Junior's defeat by Old Sunshine has been pieced together by the various flashbacks the sequence is repeated. A long shot of Junior driving across the desert landscape, which might have been suggestive of freedom is squashed into the upper half of the frame, as the lower quadrants are filled with freeze-frame and close-up images of Junior checking his rope and grip before being thrown from the bull. The title sequence demonstrates the mundane labour of the rodeo cowboy outside of the fleeting intensity of his performances, as well as the physical and psychological toll such a lifestyle entails. The expressive use of wipes, freeze-frames and split screen attempts to emulate the indiscriminate intrusion of memory into the present; Junior is haunted by a brief moment of physical trauma and professional failure which reminds him of the unsustainability of his lifestyle. In a wider symbolic sense, the opening sequence also suggests the fracturing of Junior's sense of self. He is multiplied on-screen, visible in both past and present simultaneously, yet absent in both; in Neil Campbell's terms, a haunted and haunting 'post-western' presence.

After the opening sequence Junior drives to the next competition, 'The Fourth of July Frontier Days Rodeo' in Prescott, Arizona, a real event where much of the film was shot.¹²² Arriving in his hometown nearly penniless – on the road we see him fill his car with just a half tank of gas and sleep outdoors by the bank of a river – and injured, Junior confronts Old Sunshine in his pen, triggering another onslaught of traumatic flashback memories. Clearly there is more at stake in Junior's preoccupation with the bull, and his determination to rebuild his reputation specifically in his hometown, than mere professional pride. As Michael Bliss comments, 'there is a more profound, more intangible discomfort assailing Junior, one that manifests itself in the realm of the spiritual and the ideal, not in the concrete realm of physical pain and finances' (1993:176).

Junior's malaise is revealed through his relationships with his fractured family members, each of whom represent a particular problem of life in the New West, and together expose the impossible unity and belonging, the absence of which has led him to the rodeo. Junior's father, Ace Bonner, a former rodeo champion is enthralled by an image of the past, a man out of time, rendered all the more incongruous and delusional with each passing day. We are introduced to Ace, concussed in hospital, having drunkenly crashed his truck, imploring Junior's brother Curly for a loan to fund a gold

prospecting expedition in Australia (recalling Neville Robey's similarly pathetic goldrush dreams in *The Last Movie*). Father and son might have an affinity in their clinging to an image of western masculinity scarcely sustained by the rodeo lifestyle, but Ace also acts as a warning to Junior of the dangers of unmoderated western dreams. Jim Kitses writes that *Junior Bonner* 'has no villains, just an America being paved over, and a couple of tired old hold-outs, like Peckinpah and the film itself, manfully flirting with absurdity' (2004:241). While the similarities between Ace and Junior (and perhaps Peckinpah) are emphasised throughout the film, the scene at the train station after the pair interrupt the tiresome pageantry of the town parade (*à la Easy Rider*) with a horseback joyride, reveals an important difference between the two.

Passing a bottle of whiskey between them on the deserted station platform, Ace pitches his mining venture and reminisces about his old rodeo buddies. After Junior updates his father about which of his supposed friends remain living, he discloses the dire state of his finances and Ace's demeanour noticeably hardens; unable to vocalise his anger and disappointment, for this would only expose the fact that his son is only mirroring his own inadequacies, he simply knocks off Junior's hat and steps across the tracks to hide his emotions. A locomotive passes between the pair and Junior similarly uses the cover to turn and wince from his injuries, before turning back to Ace as the locomotive pulls away; both wordlessly acknowledging their mutual failure, the pair resignedly agree to team up for one last rodeo event. The staging of this sequence in an underused train station, once the western genre's foremost symbol of advancing modernity, itself now something of a relic in long term decline, is significant. The pre-modern, upon which Ace and Junior stake their identity and which rodeo pertains to preserve, is eradicated in a post-modernity where modernity itself is decaying. The symbolic separation suggested by the lone locomotive passing between generations implies no fundamental difference, rather a difference of mood and self-consciousness; faced with a similar dilemma, Ace remains obstinately in the past, iconic and absurd, while Junior attempts to straddle eras, visibly pained. Unlike his father Junior recognises his physical limitations, the unsustainability of his lifestyle, and the need to compromise in the rapidly changing West represented by his brother Curly. (It is instructive to compare Steve McQueen's Junior with James Coburn's character, Lew, in *The Honkers*. Despite outward similarities – Lew is a slightly over-the-hill rodeo cowboy returning to

his hometown in attempt to patch things up with his family – Coburn accentuates the narcissistic hedonism of the lifestyle. Lew’s selfishness prevents him from forming any meaningful relationships, estranging him from his wife and son, and indirectly leading to the death of a rodeo clown, his only friend).

If Ace is a ghost of western past, Curly is the ghost of the West yet to come. For Curly, a real estate entrepreneur, the past is a valuable commodity which he uses to market his ‘Reata Rancheros.’ These low-cost mobile homes, “the thing of the future” as Curly boasts, built on land bought cheaply from Ace, are sold aggressively using cartoonish imagery of the frontier, complete with a mock fort and tepees. ‘Whereas the rodeo sells the dream of the past, Curly (unbeknownst to his patrons) is selling the nightmare of the future’ (Bliss, 1993:180). Despite labelling Junior a “motel cowboy” during a family dinner and admonishing his lack of financial responsibility (“I’m working on my first million, you’re still working on eight seconds”), Curly nonetheless understands the authentic appeal of the rodeo cowboy and attempts to bring Junior into the family business: “What a salesman you’d make for the rancheros. Big cowboy like you – sincere. Why you’re as genuine as a sunrise.” After Curly insults Ace, Junior promptly punches him through a plate glass window, evidently refusing the business opportunity. However, Curly is not the villain of the film. He might be a crass, exploitative and buffoonish agent of destructive change in the West, but by selling a future based on a creative imagining of the past, Curly is arguably upholding western traditions as much as Junior and Ace.

Lastly, caught between Ace and Curly, between past and future, is Junior’s mother Ellie. Living separated from the unfaithful and impossibly selfish Ace, and resigned to being moved into the mobile home business by Curly, Ellie is victim to two irreconcilable and equally destructive dreams of the West. Her own relationship with the past is conveyed through her business collecting antiques of the Old West; unlike Ace she has no desire to enter into the past, only to preserve it at a remove, and with none of Curly’s rapacious commercialism. By using the Bonner family to suggest modes of western existence all incompatible with the authentic ideal pursued by Junior, Peckinpah plots the dilemma of American Authenticity with more complexity than other films in the rodeo western cycle; with past, present, and future variously untenable, and with Junior scarcely able to uphold his cowboy identity, the film substitutes trauma, social isolation and emptiness for the relative reassurance of

nostalgia and melancholy. Peckinpah's 'post-western' treatment of the problem of authenticity in the seventies is most vividly articulated in a sequence shortly after the opening credits, in which Junior, having arrived home, visits his father's cabin on a small ranch outside of town.

As Junior pulls up outside the dilapidated old cabin – looking more *Grapes of Wrath* than a functioning modern ranch – he glances across to a gravel pit where a bulldozer offers a brief portent of the cabin's fate. After calling Ace's name, more in hope than expectation, Junior steps inside the cabin and gazes around its interior incredulously. The camera pans across discarded furniture, broken shelves, various rodeo posters and newspaper clippings, all covered in a thick layer of dust, before Junior is drawn to a framed picture. Over a close up of the shattered picture of his father in his prime as a rodeo champion, Junior says, "Sorry I missed you, Ace" and steps back outside (Fig. 31).

McQueen delivers the line casually, as if Junior had missed Ace by a few minutes, not months or years, and not realising or refusing to accept the implications of the condition of the cabin for his own lifestyle.

The return to an empty or damaged home is a common theme in rodeo westerns, functioning to expose the absence which rodeo is designed to fill in the protagonist's life while emphasising his rootlessness and existential ennui. *The Lusty Men* begins as Jeff McCloud (Robert Mitchum), a down-on-his-luck rodeo cowboy returns to his old home, a dilapidated ranch, and digs up his childhood possessions – a toy gun, a cowboy comic, and pocket money stored in a tobacco tin – from underneath the house, mementos which offer a moment of solace along with a reminder of how far the reality of cowboy lifestyle differs from the boyhood ideal. In *J.W. Coop*, the childhood home is an overgrown time warp of a pre-war family home, as J.W.'s senile mother talks as if her long-deceased husband were alive and Roosevelt were president. In all three films the return home is a reminder of poverty, ageing, decay and failed personal relationships. Writing about *The Lusty Men*, Neil Campbell writes that the return to a childhood home is characteristic of many 'post-westerns', marking 'an unearthing and resurfacing of and confrontation with some hidden history, both personal and political. It is a moment of uncanniness, where the dream of security and familiarity is unsettled by the realization of the unhomely and the unfamiliar' (2013:69-70). The return home in *Junior Bonner* is truly nostalgic, in the sense that Svetlana Boym uses the term, as a longing for a home which no longer exists or has

never existed.¹²³ The dilapidated cabin serves as a reminder that the Thoreauvean dreams of so many American cowboys of living on their own modest piece of land just outside the reaches of civilization, like Tom Doniphan in *Liberty Valance*, are unsustainable, triggering the desire for that absence anew. Furthermore, in *Junior Bonner*, the home is not permitted to decay with the passage of time, but is shown being casually and destructively swept aside.

Peckinpah experienced the loss of his own rural retreat, as his grandfather's cattle ranch in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, where he spent much of his childhood and nurtured his complex relationship with the romantic myths of the West, was unexpectedly sold out of the family by his mother.¹²⁴ Perhaps inspired by the parallels between his personal life and *Junior Bonner*, Peckinpah explores the individual psychological effects and wider symbolic meaning of the destruction of Ace's cabin in an intensely stylised and virtuosic montage sequence. Comprised of 88 shots in slightly over three minutes – with an average shot length of 2.1 seconds, the sequence accelerates to a crescendo of flash frames and shots a fraction of a second in length (Fig. C) – the sequence depicts Junior descending into a gravel pit to ask the construction workers about Ace's whereabouts before ascending to discover the debris of the cabin. As stylistically radical as the Agua Verde finale of *The Wild Bunch* in terms of departing from Hollywood conventions of spatial, temporal and narrative continuity, and all the more thought provoking and disjunctive in contrast to rest of the film, the richly detailed montage sequence rewards close scrutiny; through subtleties of point-of-view, the symbolic meaning of the action, and the psychological motives underpinning its construction, Peckinpah articulates – and moreover, encourages the audience to feel – the tragic dialectic of American Authenticity in the New West.

Leaving the cabin, Junior scans the altered landscape of what used to be his father's ranch, triggering a cut to a fast zoom from his point-of-view to a row of prefabricated homes advancing on the far ridge. The zoom exaggerates Junior's sense of the mobile homes, which we later learn are just one part of his brother's real estate enterprise, rapidly encroaching upon his father's land. Another brief long lens shot from Junior's point-of view offers a glimpse of the chaotic scene within the pit, with a mining conveyor spewing dust and bulldozers passing to and fro. This relatively conventional (if ever so slightly jarring in its pace and distortion of space) and psychologically motivated

shot/reverse shot pattern is then broken, as a medium shot of Junior gazing into the gravel pit next to his car is followed by a reverse shot, not as we might expect, of what Junior is looking at, but a long shot at his back showing him climbing into the car. Introducing a more distant, continuity breaking perspective on events, Peckinpah thus establishes two levels of narration; psychologically motivated and character focused on the one hand, and a kind of objective scrutiny on the other, which rapidly alternate and begin to merge as the sequence progresses.

As Junior descends into the gravel pit the cutting rate increases, and lines of movement are disorientatingly crossed. Various shots of machinery – including shaky car-mounted shots of digging equipment, a crash tilt and zoom-out of a conveyor leading to a belching smokestack, and a close-up of a hellish rotating furnace – deny any sense of what work is being done and contribute to a spectacle of pointless mechanistic violence. Junior stops to ask a worker wearing alien goggles and a mask if he has seen Ace, who bellows over the din, “No! Never heard of him!” confirming to Junior his father’s ignominy and that he has indeed missed him by much more than a few minutes. As he drives away, he looks over his shoulder to see a bulldozer sweep towards the cabin, and the bucket is shown plucking Ace’s old mailbox out of the ground in close-up. Distracted, Junior misses a bulldozer approaching his car from the side, and another bearing down on him from the front, which stops just in time (it is fitting that Junior would be so preoccupied by Ace’s entrapment that he scarcely realises that the same forces are preparing to sweep him away too).

What follows is the nearest *Junior Bonner* comes to a traditional western duel, as Junior faces off against a silhouetted worker perched in the cabin of the bulldozer. Junior stands up in his car and gestures for the bulldozer to retreat, but the worker hidden behind aviators leans standoffishly on his wheel, spills dirt on the bonnet of Junior’s car, edges forward, and raises the bucket threateningly. Dwarfed and intimidated by the faceless malice of the other vehicle, Junior relents and reverses. Peckinpah cross-cuts between this rapidly edited stand-off and shots of Ace’s cabin being destroyed. Beginning with a high-angle shot emphatically not from the distracted Junior’s point of view, we see two bulldozers taking turns to level the cabin. As the confrontation intensifies the bulldozers are shown from multiple angles, at different rates of slow-motion, repeatedly tearing apart the cabin like hungry predators. Exploiting the same techniques used to suggest the visceral thrill and horror of

violence in *The Wild Bunch*, Peckinpah shows the violent destruction of Ace's way of life, and simultaneously portends the same fate for Junior, as the sequence crescendos in a flurry of gnashing bulldozer teeth.

The tension subsides as the cutting rate slows briefly and Junior emerges from the chaos of the gravel pit. As work obviously continues below, Junior glances one last time across the valley towards the land where Ace's cabin stood and realises what the audience has already seen. A long shot of the debris and a reverse shot of Junior grimacing resignedly triggers the breathless rapid-fire climax of the sequence, with twelve shots in a just ten seconds breaking all temporal and spatial continuity to represent a bombardment of associative imagery emanating from Junior's interiority:

- (1) The bulldozer eating into the house in close-up, as Junior imagines what has just occurred;
- (2) The cracked photograph, sole surviving evidence of Ace in his prime, which Junior had in his hands only minutes earlier;
- (3) Another slow-motion shot of the destruction;
- (4) Long shot of the cabin standing;
- (5) More slow-motion destruction in close-up;
- (6) Another flash of the cabin still standing;
- (7 and 8) Two more shots of the house being destroyed, repeating the event, as if to express the trauma and disbelief that something might be there one minute and gone the next;
- (9) Ace on horseback in close-up, as the cabin triggers a memory of the man himself;
- (10) More slow-motion debris;
- (11) Another close-up of Ace on horseback;
- (12) The mailbox being crushed, as Junior recalls the final moment he directly witnessed before the house was destroyed.

In these twelve shots, the distinction between objective/omniscient narration and subjective or psychologically motivated montage is blurred; Junior's imagining of the event he did not directly witness and the repetitions of the event actually happening are indistinguishable (Figs. 32-3). In this way Peckinpah intimates the feeling of grief as a repeated loss. As Michael Bliss puts it, 'remembrance has restored the house to life, but only to show it dying once more' (1993:172).

Because what is being grieved is objectless – Ace is shown in the following scene alive, merely mildly concussed in hospital; the decaying house is simply a trigger – and, crucially, *belated*, not simply by the few seconds in which Junior missed the cabin’s destruction, but by the years or generations since the lifestyle desired by Ace and Junior represented anything like a practical possibility, Peckinpah condenses into these twelve shots the feeling of American Authenticity; that is, the sudden and traumatic realisation that the ideal and the real are utterly incompatible and any possibility for their resolution has long since lapsed. However, the kinetic energy and frenetic conflict of the sequence prevent it from being elegiac; the contemplative, melancholy mood normally attached to the authentic in westerns is absent.

Stephen Prince argues that in associative montages, ‘Peckinpah employed the expressive powers of editing to transcend chronological time or sequential space, and tied these to his characters’ needs to escape or deny the bitter, oppressive conditions of their lives’ (1998:87). Indeed, the montage arguably demonstrates Junior’s defiance in the face of the destructive change ushered in by Curly’s army of bulldozers, as he instantaneously conjures imaginatively what has disappeared in reality:

[Montage] reasserts the primacy of memory and desire over the circumstances in life that have eroded the past and produced an alienated present [...] the montage showing Junior’s reimagining of the destruction of Ace’s house asserts a defiance of narrative chronology and, therefore, of the history that will doom both Junior and his father (Prince, 1998:89)

The distant past (represented by the cracked photograph), the recent past (represented by the house still standing), an elastic moment of destruction (the bulldozers tearing into the house), and the future (represented by the advancing mobile homes), are all folded together in Junior’s mind offering at very least the possibility of transcending the intractable destructive progress of history in the New West. Bliss notes that the flash inserts of Ace on horseback at the end of the sequence, triggered by the memory of the photograph lost in the rubble, does not as we might expect, depict a younger Ace in his prime, rather the shots are culled from the wild-cow milking contest at the rodeo later in the film (1993:173). This was probably done partly out of practical necessity – it would hardly be economical to shoot an additional scene for the sake of a few frames – but it contributes further to the sense of memory having the power to defy historical chronology. Out of the destruction, Junior presciently

anticipates Ace's brief revival and the reconciliation between father and son after their confrontation at the deserted railway station.

Junior's attempt to defy historical chronology while avoiding self-pitying elegiacism and absurdity, demonstrated by the bulldozer montage sequence, offers a way of understanding the treatment of American Authenticity in the early seventies rodeo western. Faced with two equally untenable expanses of history, a past he cannot remember already being erased, and a future of continuous destructive change, the rodeo cowboy attempts to bring all these irreconcilable dimensions of western existence into the present. The centrepiece of all rodeo movies, the climactic ride against a bovine nemesis – usually distended with slow-motion into a balletic documentary-like spectacle of iconic poise, coiled musculature and suspended dust – is a revival of a lost sense of being and a defiance of history, if only for those elasticated eight seconds. In Marshall Berman's terms, rodeo cowboys are modernists of the seventies, attempting to 'bring it all back home' into the present by performing American Authenticity against the currents of an arena insulated from history. This is where the 'post-western' and especially the rodeo movie, differs from the apocalyptic revisionism of the late sixties or the wilderness retreat of the early seventies: the rodeo rider is given to compromise and struggle, consigned to a life on the road, earning money and performing in an entertainment industry, if only in the faint hope of momentarily excavating and realising an indefinable quality of existence dubiously inherited from history rendered as myth. *Junior Bonner* ends with a racing aerial shot of Junior heading "down the road," still chasing American Authenticity between old and new, and casting a long shadow against the dying light. The major conflicts of the film remain unresolved, yet the closing note is not the hyperbolic self-pitying defeatism associated with many Hollywood Renaissance endings (cf. *Easy Rider*, *Little Big Man*, *Electra-Glide In Blue*), but one of reluctant compromise and carrying on, recalling the closing line of *The Wild Bunch*: "It ain't like it used to be, but it'll do."

[...] So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back – Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear And Loathing in Las Vegas* (2005:68).

My heroes have always been cowboys.

And they still are, it seems.

Sadly, in search of, but one step in back of,

Themselves and their slow-movin' dreams

– Willie Nelson, 'My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys'

The 1972 rodeo cycle speaks to the difficulty of maintaining old ideals in a fundamentally changed America. The rodeo cowboy's pursuit of American Authenticity is contained within a form which offers continuities with, but also attempts to update and move beyond the traditional western; the failure of the rodeo cowboy is therefore also a failure of the genre to prove its usefulness for communicating ideals or values, for achieving any kind of reconciliation, or for establishing a sense of national identity. The rodeo western cycle was short-lived, perhaps primarily due to the restrictive formula and lack of possibilities for violent action, but also because its implicit promise of excavating and reviving a form of western authenticity for the 1970s goes unfulfilled; the beleaguered, flawed and traumatised rodeo cowboy is ill-equipped to embody or locate an antidote to the quiet desperation of the New West. Yet as I have argued, by the end of the decade, with the western in its traditional form having all but disappeared from the cinema, *Urban Cowboy* manages to set aside the cynicism, melancholy, and alienation of the 1972 cycle, confidently restoring the cowboy hero and redefining American Authenticity for the Reagan era. To conclude this chapter I will use *The Electric Horseman* and *Bronco Billy*, two 'post-westerns' with elements of screwball comedy released with a few months of *Urban Cowboy*, to explain this dramatic transition within the modern western; these two films offer

a missing link, from the loneliness and trauma of Junior witnessing a personal and historical cataclysm in the opening of *Junior Bonner*, to Bud, assuredly breezing into downtown Houston from his family farm in the opening of *Urban Cowboy*,

Sydney Pollack's *The Electric Horseman* acts as a coda to the 1972 rodeo cycle. Sonny Steele (played by Pollack regular Robert Redford) is a washed-up former rodeo champion who begins the film on tour, promoting 'Ranch Breakfast Cereal' through an alcoholic torpor for a large corporation. A montage sequence during the opening credits shows Sonny's rise and fall throughout the seventies, beginning with footage resembling the bull riding sequences in *Junior Bonner* or *J.W. Coop* of Sonny riding in small town rodeo competitions, before showing the championship buckles piling up on a shelf and injuries accumulating on x-rays, as he reaches his peak at Madison Square Garden. The sequence completes Sonny's backstory summarising his 'selling out' to a corporation; a magazine article reports that AMPCO has added him to their "stable of corporate symbols," a graphic designer paints the moustache Redford wears in the film onto his picture, and Sonny is shown posing with a cereal box in a gaudy rhinestone-covered Nudie suit.¹²⁵ Sonny is introduced as an undignified and pathetic victim of seventies corporate culture as he is gradually commodified to the point of becoming purely symbolic. Arriving late and drunk to yet another demeaning appearance at a football game, Sonny reaches an existential nadir witnessing a proxy perform his routine of riding around the arena, cereal packet held aloft, wearing a suit covered in small lightbulbs. His identity has been reduced to an illuminated outline, vacant in the middle to such an extent that his presence is not required; "that's not me!" he complains to the organiser, who damningly replies that "they don't know the difference." The erosion of Sonny's sense of self is confirmed as he refuses to have his picture taken with a middle-aged female admirer, suggesting instead that she stand in front of the poster of him holding a cereal box, within which there is another picture of him holding the box; a *mise en abyme* of alienation by commercial mediation.

It is fitting that Sonny's final humiliation and self-destroying commodification occurs within the exemplary city of the New West, Las Vegas, where Sonny and his entourage (including Willie Nelson whose songs feature extensively on the soundtrack) are sequestered at the iconic Caesar's Palace for a glitzy corporate event announcing the takeover of bank. AMPCO, the film's caricature of

voracious diversified conglomerates, attempt to bring their disparate business interests together under the image of Rising Star, a thoroughbred race horse, depicted in a television commercial galloping freely through a picturesque landscape (*The Electric Horseman* was co-produced by Universal and Columbia, two studios not yet under the ownership of AMPCO-esque conglomerates). The disclosure of the horse's mistreatment in preparation for its role in a disco-themed live performance to shareholders is the final straw for Sonny, capping the film's exposition of a farcically degenerate capitalism within a representation of Las Vegas in line with various commentators who have marvelled at the city's glaring inauthenticity.

In the famous passage from *Fear And Loathing in Las Vegas* at the head of this section, Hunter S. Thompson gazes West from Las Vegas and reflects on how quickly the 'wave' of the countercultural zeitgeist in the late sixties had subsided, leaving the absurdly antithetical city in its wake. Through Sonny's sobering realisation of just how far he has fallen from the western ethos, Pollack conveys a similar righteous bewilderment to Thompson's 1972 novel: how did it come to *this*? Las Vegas appeared to observers in the 1970s, Neil Campbell writes, as 'the postmodern New West's capital city' where 'any sense of a fixed, absolute, definable 'real' was dismissed' (2000:152). Baudrillard would concurrently term Vegas the 'absolute advertising city' (1994:91) for its orgiastic proliferation of signs, symbols, and images. In line with these contemporary views on Las Vegas, Pollack constructs the city as an absolute antithesis and betrayal of western authenticity.

If the opening act of *The Electric Horseman* resembles a Hollywood Renaissance western – with its bitter indignation, strong anti-corporate message, and pathetic unmotivated hero – this is only a temporary effect, a counterpoint designed to motivate and offer a sharp contrast with the unreservedly uplifting and restorative narrative that follows. The key transition occurs as Sonny steals the valuable racehorse, trotting defiantly through the casino and down the Las Vegas strip, the lights on his suit matching the blazing neon signs in the most conspicuous of disguises, before turning off the lights and disappearing into the black desert (Fig. 34). Escaping into the picturesque wilderness, Sonny rediscovers himself and plans to score a symbolic victory over AMPCO by releasing Rising Star into the wild. However, the familiar trope of escaping into the wilderness is largely a backdrop

for the film's central reconciliatory device – the screwball romance between Sonny and Hallie (Jane Fonda).

Wes. D Gehring discusses *The Electric Horseman* as a 'Capra film for the 1980s,' arguing that the film updates the device employed in Frank Capra's 'populist films' of the 1930s and 1940s, of having a little guy stand up against seemingly insurmountable forces of corruption with the aid of an initially cynical or hostile female character (1983:175-8). Hallie begins the film as a fast-talking, ambitious newscaster, who tracks down Sonny initially only in order to generate a big story and plans to betray the location of the lush valley where Rising Star is to be set free. In screwball fashion, the bickering and diametrically opposed couple (west/east, wilderness/city, laconic/talkative, common sense/intellectual) gradually resolve their differences, and by forming a romantic relationship, achieve wider social reconciliation.¹²⁶ Hallie drops the affectation of an ambitious, manipulative reporter, only concerned with the next scoop, and utilises the mass media to generate public support for Sonny's mission. Initially scoffing at her suggestion that his story might be about the "great American cowboy," Sonny begins to believe Hallie that there might be broader meaning to his instinctive theft of the horse, and reveals a more caring and compassionate side to his personality.

Hiking through picturesque, untarnished spectacles of landscape, emphatically opposed to the decadence of Las Vegas, offers the couple the time to simply be together and the space across which their differences, accreted by their respective environments, might dissolve. At one point, Sonny even leads Hallie in a reluctant rendition of 'America the Beautiful' to pass the time, serenading the "purple mountain majesties" against a fitting backdrop, with only a slight hint of knowing cliché, and far from the bitterly ironic version at the close of *The Deer Hunter*. By the time that Sonny encourages Hallie to read a passage from her notes as the pair rest by a stream, any tonal remnant of cynicism or irony remaining from the opening act is discarded, replaced by unabashed romanticism:

"I feel I'm seeing this country for the first time. Not looking down from a jet thirty thousand feet up, but from the low angle of a special man who means to cross on foot, leading a thoroughbred to a secret destination, to a private goal, to a fairness he intends to find in these valleys."

These timorously delivered, hokey lines are not merely sentiment; at the film's conclusion, memorably described by Vincent Canby as being characterised by an 'appealingly dopey populism,' they achieve a kind of social realisation.¹²⁷ Inspired by Hallie's story, Sonny gains the support of the American public who force AMPCO to perform a u-turn and drop their charges. The metaphysical 'fairness' represented by the release of Rising Star is enacted by the formation of a romantic couple and by the will of ordinary American folk, who are shown collectively to have the power to set a corporate behemoth on a more ethical course (arguably a Reaganite vision of conservative populism and self-regulation).

The flaw in the miraculous reconciliation represented by the images of Rising Star running free in the sublime wilderness is that these images are identical to those deployed by the corporation's television advert; the film's earnest attempt at restoring American Authenticity replicates the very clichés used to satirise the commodification of the West. Whereas many Hollywood Renaissance westerns are characterised by acute self-consciousness about the politics of form, *The Electric Horseman* appears wilfully ignorant of its own role in commercial exploitation of the West, despite featuring two of Hollywood's most lucrative stars. This is particularly apparent in the scene in which Sonny delivers a speech explaining why he stole the horse ("He's got more heart, more drive, and more soul than most people you'll meet – and they're hanging lights all over him"). Hallie surreptitiously switches the video camera on, recording the candid improvised speech, in which the horse functions as a metonym for the degradation and commodification of traditional western values. This is contrasted with the stilted and buffoonish speech Sonny gives when he believes the camera is rolling. Sonny's inauthentic mediated image is contrasted with his off-camera sincerity, and therefore the film's narration itself is excluded from the processes of mediation, as we are given an ideal vantage point to intimately participate in the restoration of the cowboy hero.

Clint Eastwood's *Bronco Billy*, released six months after *The Electric Horseman*, similarly restores the cowboy hero through the reconciliation of a screwball couple, but does so with a much greater degree of reflexivity. Eastwood's titular character, self-styled as the "fastest gun in the West," and named after the silent movie cowboy Broncho Billy Anderson, leads a small troupe of Wild West themed circus performers. The struggling show is constructed as a refuge from contemporary

America, an arena where the values of 1930s serial westerns are kept alive, inverting the relationship between the real America discovered outside of the performance arena in *The Electric Horseman*. Billy addresses his show to children in the crowd, promoting obedience, prayer and telling the truth, and his speech is littered with clichéd phrases like, “don’t you just love these wide open spaces, where the deer and the antelope roam,” delivered with a straight-face. The scarcely attended performance in the opening sequence is introduced as “the most authentic wild west show in America” before collapsing into a calamitous farce as the Indian snake charmer is bitten and Billy wounds his assistant during a knife throwing trick. The lack of any inherent authenticity is important, as Edward Gallaent explains:

This Wild West show is not the last refuge of representatives of a vanished world, of actual westerners reduced to entertainers, but an imaginary world created out of western myth by a crew of refugees from different situations in a degraded modern America (1994:185).

The troupe are all revealed to be ex-convicts, with Billy in particular admitting to having served “seven years in Folsom” for the attempted murder of his unfaithful wife; their identities as westerners are shown to be affectations borne out of a need for rehabilitation in a community of outsiders. When Billy proposes that the group rob a train in order to raise money for a new circus tent, Lily (Sandra Locke) protests, saying “there are no more cowboys and Indians. That’s in the past.” Billy then gives a speech, revealing his background as a shoe-salesman from New Jersey, and justifying the need for self-constructed identities as an escape from contemporary America: “As a kid, I never even saw a cowboy, much less the wide open spaces, except when I could scrounge up a quarter for a picture show. I was a shoe salesman until I was thirty-one years old. Deep in my heart I always wanted to be a cowboy. One day I laid down my shoe horn and swore I’d never live in the city again.” The resultant train robbery is a comical failure with the diesel locomotive, impervious to the Chief’s bow and arrow, hopelessly outpacing the chasing posse. It is simply another spectacular performance, staged for the benefit of the young boy who watches through a carriage window.

For Billy the authentic West is located not in actual history or geography, but in the myths and values of an imaginary West accessible only through performance in various forms of outmoded entertainment: the circus, the wild west shows, the B-westerns on which Billy’s persona is based, and

perhaps Eastwood's *Bronco Billy* itself. Far from attempting to locate some vestige of the historical West where American Authenticity might be excavated, *Bronco Billy*'s Wild West depends upon its artificial construction in opposition to contemporary America in order to prove Billy's message: Echoing Sissy's question to Bud in *Urban Cowboy*, Lily asks Billy, the "phony cowboy from New Jersey," if he is "for real," to which he replies simply, "I am who I want to be." (Evidencing the shift, as I argued in Chapter Three, from an authenticity conceived as the discovery of one's true self, to the fashioning of selves and the creation of personae).

Bronco Billy ends with an implausibly redemptive performance. Having reunited with Miss Lily, Billy re-establishes himself as the patriarch – with less reluctance than his comparable role in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* – of a surrogate family of romantic dreamers, and the troupe perform flawlessly for to a sold-out audience mainly comprised of children, to whom Billy preaches about the importance of prayer, obedience to parents, and truthfulness. William Beard argues that in *Bronco Billy*, Eastwood establishes himself as a benevolent patriarch, under whose authority a community of individuals are enabled to 'be what they most ideally and self-realisingly want to be' (2000:78). 'The stress on paternity,' argues Paul Smith, 'becomes a way of asserting that both the genre and the white male will continue to rule, will settle all claims, and be the dispenser of rights' (1993:37). However this paternal self-realising authenticity, conjured by performing western myth, and articulated in old fashioned conservative values, is like the Wild West show itself; a temporary illusion or dazzling trick. There is little suggestion in the film that Billy's authenticity might have any historical realisation outside of the performance arena. 'The tent,' Gallafent explains, 'becomes a space where an older America, both in history and of entertainment, can be remembered and celebrated, but at the cost of a rejection of the contemporary world' (1994:189).

If Billy is less than convincing as a 'real' cowboy outside of the arena (even those adults who appear to take his persona seriously, such as the cop who challenges him to a duel, or the psychiatric doctor who asks for shooting lessons, are only using him to give life to their own fantasies), yet he is somehow able to embody and inspire a sense of authenticity through performance, this would suggest that Eastwood has somewhat ironically constructed his alter-ego as a contemporary heir to Buffalo Bill. However, Buffalo Bill's Wild West depended upon the pretence of historical re-enactment; its

aura of authenticity was generated by the audience's wilful belief in a supposedly verifiable past, but Billy's aura depends upon precisely the opposite; a New Jersey shoe salesman defying and overcoming his past. 'Cody himself refused to diminish his productions by adding 'show' to the title,' Scott Simmon writes, rather 'he claimed to offer a sample of the genuine Old West, authenticated by his very presence' (2003:61). In *Bronco Billy*'s arena the 'show' is emphasised and the act, while certainly old-fashioned in the context of 1980, is comprised of relatively timeless spectacular tricks not dependent on any kind of historical framing.

Bronco Billy can be understood as a cautious endorsement of the power of performance and popular myth to overcome historical circumstances and bond together a community of individuals. Were it not for Eastwood's characteristically subtle ironic remove, and the inherent reflexivity with which the film refers to Eastwood's star persona and the western genre, one could draw comparisons between Billy, and Bud in *Urban Cowboy*. Both men prove themselves authentic cowboys by acts of self-definition, artifice, performance, and crucially, by wilful ignorance of historical contradiction. *Bronco Billy* does however, accommodate an alternative reading, one which does not necessarily conflate Billy and Eastwood's point of view: the utopian performance at the film's conclusion is contained within a patchwork tent made from American flags sewn by patients at an insane asylum. This bizarrely patriotic symbol is shown in the final show of the film from the perspective of an ascending helicopter, rendering *Bronco Billy*'s Wild West Show gradually less significant against the unremarkable surrounding landscape of the New West (Fig. 35). This suggestion of the wild west show being adrift from historical reality – absurd, deluded, wrapped in the regalia of a patriotism equated with madness – allows for a critical perspective from outside the arena, even as the film celebrates the ahistorical rejuvenation of western myth happening inside.

The ambivalent symbolism of its conclusion notwithstanding, *Bronco Billy* functions as a rebuttal to Robert Altman's *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, Or Sitting Bull's History Lesson*, a film which – perhaps more so than any other Hollywood Renaissance western – cynically skewers western myth, finding in the wild west arena nothing more than a shameless distortion of history centred on a cult of personality. Altman's film exposes the dangers of mistaking legend for reality, as Cody (Paul Newman), scrutinises his reflection and portraits and struggles to live up to the role he plays in the

arena. Altman shows how, of the two historical interpretations contained in the film's title – the story of heroic conquest on the one hand, and the absent, silenced history of genocide on the other – the former enters into popular culture through a venal and narcissistic entertainment industry strongly identified as proto-cinematic. As Robert Kolker writes, 'the film is about the generation of ideology itself [...] America and its history is enclosed within an enclosed compound of actors and producers who keep sucking the past into their arena and recreating it into a banal and simple present' (2000:379). Altman recognises and regrets that history is inseparable from fictions and ideological distortions, not least in popular culture.

In Altman's realises that myth and history are so impossibly entangled as to deny the possibility of ever accessing a more truthful account of the past. In this sense Altman echoes John Ford's aphoristic "print the legend" conclusion to *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, in the realisation of history being inaccessible outside of legends which are 'essentially autonomous of historical fact or any individual retelling' (Langford, 2003:30). But where in Ford this reflexive commentary on mythmaking and history is coloured by a melancholy yearning for a more authentic history and means of representing that history (however impossible), for Altman the very idea of an authentic or truthful past in an always-already damned America is little more than a bleak joke. History, for Altman, is a brazenly ideological, commodified fiction, sustained by a cynical mass entertainment industry, or, as Sitting Bull puts it through his interlocutor, "nothing more than disrespect for the dead."

Though much less bitter and cynical, Eastwood arrives at a similar conclusion in *Bronco Billy*: the 'real' West, the only West to which any meaning or values can be attached, is also an invented West, found only in arenas both physical and textual, and to which the actual historical West – such as we can perceive it – is opposed. Having more of a stake in heroism and western myth than Altman, Eastwood realises that it is precisely that which is added to history by popular culture – star appeal, spectacle, a moral code – that might form the basis for the revival of the cowboy hero. Where Buffalo Bill's arena promised to contain a version of history in which heroic authenticity is understood to have been a possibility, Bronco Billy's arena promises the opposite; history, now understood as the only obstacle in the path of a revived heroism, is what lies outside. Inside the

distinctly nostalgic, yet essentially ahistorical arena, Eastwood is able to conjure – much like Bud in *Urban Cowboy* – an authentic western hero on fundamentally altered terms befitting the shift occurring in American culture and society on the cusp of Reagan’s presidency. It is fitting therefore that *Urban Cowboy*, the film which restores the cowboy hero with the least degree of ambiguity or self-consciousness was considerably more successful commercially than all the other films discussed in this chapter, grossing nearly \$47 million, thirteenth in the annual box office ranking for 1980.¹²⁸

If the ‘post-westerns’ of 1980 appear to solve the abiding problem of American Authenticity, it is largely by redefining the concept itself. This is achieved, I have argued, in defiance of historicity, and by celebrating myths, images, and affected identities as the new ‘real’, befitting the transformed landscapes of the New West and the political rhetoric of Reagan’s America. It is also achieved by smoothing the countercultural or oppositional edges of the cowboy hero that characterised the 1972 rodeo cycle (Redford as a liberal populist, Eastwood as a conservative rebel promoting family values, not to mention the slavishly conformist Travolta) and restoring traditional notions of masculinity to the detriment of each film’s active and independent women. Indeed, Robin Wood cites both *Bronco Billy* and *Urban Cowboy* as watershed examples of ‘Hollywood Antifeminism’ in the 1980s, turning back the at best precarious steps toward representational equality made during the Hollywood Renaissance. Both films feature strong, assertive women, who prove themselves the equal of anxious men in western-themed masculine activities (sharpshooting and bull riding respectively). The cowboy hero is only restored when both women learn to submit to supporting feminine roles. ‘Both narratives,’ Wood writes, ‘teach the woman to be fully complicit in her own oppression’ (2003:184). The same is true for *The Electric Horseman*, in which the revival of the cowboy hero and the wider social reconciliation symbolised by the release of *Rising Star* is guaranteed by Jane Fonda’s transition from a successful – if cynical and implicitly dissatisfied - urban newscaster, to a tamed and adoring sidekick for Robert Redford. Pollack’s knowing use of the classical device of the screwball romance cannot mitigate the film’s complicity in the ideological swing implied by having Fonda (so-called ‘Hanoi Jane’, who had not yet shaken off her association with anti-establishment political activism earlier in the decade) willingly submit to a traditional, and relatively silenced, feminine role and thereby rediscover a form of patriotism (“I feel like I’m seeing this country for the first time”).

American Authenticity has always tended to be a masculine preoccupation – thus, the western as its foremost vehicle – but rarely even in the classical western had the embodiment of authenticity in the cowboy hero required such a strictly gendered counterpoint as in *The Electric Horseman*, *Bronco Billy*, and *Urban Cowboy*.

The ‘post-westerns’ of 1980 offer reassuringly simple solutions to the abiding problem of authenticity in American culture, as the feelings of rage, anguish, melancholy, and nostalgia, that characterised the pursuit of authenticity in the Hollywood Renaissance quite suddenly resolve into cautious affirmation. The trick these films perform is to defy the historicity which lent ideals like authenticity their tantalising impossibility; by wilfully ignoring both the recent history of the traumatic and divided sixties, and the national history upon which mythic ideals are projected, it is possible to conjure and insist upon the authentic in the present. *Bronco Billy*, *Urban Cowboy*, and to a lesser extent *The Electric Horseman*, all share the belief that the mythic quality of American existence so often mourned by westerns was within ‘us’ all along, that the only cost of apprehending authenticity is the ignorance of historical contradiction; a ‘real’ cowboy is whoever truly believes it and the ‘real’ West is wherever we want it to be. With this perpetually self-fulfilling logic authenticity is no longer treated as an abstract ideal, and subsequently solidifies into something resembling dominant ideology. Whereas the ‘post-westerns’ of 1972 represented another failed attempt to bring the western back home to the present, the ‘post-westerns’ of 1980 succeed in overcoming the western, realising that the historical basis of the genre is the only obstacle in the path of reviving its ideals, hitherto understood as irretrievably lapsed.



Fig. 27: Downtown Houston. *Urban Cowboy* (1980)



Fig. 28: *Urban Cowboy* (1980)



Fig. 29: *Urban Cowboy* (1980)



Fig. 30: "You'll make hippie out of me yet." J.W. Coop (1972)



Fig. 31: "Sorry I missed ya, Ace." Junior Bonner (1972)



Fig. 32: *Junior Bonner* (1972)



Fig. 33: *Junior Bonner* (1972)



Fig. 34: *The Electric Horseman* (1979)



Fig. 35: *Bronco Billy* (1980)

Conclusion:

Dusty Spectacles

It is a word of ominous import. As we use it in reference to human existence, its provenance is the museum [...] That the word has become part of the moral slang of our day points to the peculiar nature of our fallen condition, our anxiety over the credibility of existence and of individual existences – Lionel Trilling (1972:93).

“What one loves most in life are the things that fade” / “The only thing greater than their passion for America...Was their passion for each other” – contrasting taglines on posters for *Heaven’s Gate* (1980).

Authenticity and Postmodernism

The years 1980-1984 offer a convenient, though far from final, conclusion to the narrative and argument concerning American Authenticity espoused in this thesis. This period of marked sociocultural transition, or fresh conjuncture, saw Ronald Reagan’s first presidential term, the definitive end of the Hollywood Renaissance, an unprecedented generic recession for the western, and a concerted undermining of the concept of authenticity itself within intellectual culture; the years in which the historical, generic, philosophical, and artistic co-ordinates of American Authenticity are lost, ignored, forgotten, or replotted.

In the early 1980s, postmodernism – the term itself dating back as far as the late 1950s in literary criticism and gaining wider currency throughout the 1970s – emerges, as Andreas Huyssen put it at the time, as ‘one of the most contested terrains in the intellectual life of Western societies’ (1984:11). Authenticity and a constellation of attendant terms – originality, individuality, totality, and alienation – were placed at the centre of debates about the slide into postmodernism, figuring as those

aspects of modern thought originating in the Enlightenment which were suddenly discredited or fatally compromised within the ‘new sensibility.’ In 1984, Fredric Jameson published his seminal contribution to the discourse, ‘Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,’ which bemoaned the decline of authenticity and with it historicity, under the auspices of postmodern thought and culture. Jameson introduces postmodernism as a ‘cultural dominant’ constituted by ‘senses of the end’ in a diverse range of fields (1991:1). For the western, at least, the end had apparently already been reached, with 1984 standing as the first year in Hollywood history in which not a single western saw a theatrical release.

The blame for the disappearance of the western from the genre map in the early 1980s is commonly placed squarely on the fiasco surrounding the production and release of *Heaven’s Gate* (1980). The story of how the Michael Cimino’s epic western – proposed at \$7.5 million, budgeted at \$11.5 million, and written off at \$44 million after a negligible box office gross of \$1.3 million – infamously condemned by Vincent Canby as an ‘unqualified disaster,’ led to the near-bankruptcy and sale of United Artists to Kirk Kerkorian has been well told.¹²⁹ That no mainstream westerns were produced for nearly five years after the initial release of *Heaven’s Gate* is not coincidental, but as Edward Buscombe has written, the ‘conventional wisdom that the western was killed off overnight [...] must be an oversimplification’ (1988:52). The western was already in long term decline, for reasons I discussed in the previous chapter. As Stephen Bach’s insider’s account of the production reveals, *Heaven’s Gate* was initially resisted by United Artists, who considered the western an ‘outmoded thing’ and removing ‘the onus of the picture’s being a western’ seemed to production staff a pressing concern in the development of the script (1985:130, 156). The film’s failure at the box office only confirmed what studios already suspected: westerns were unfashionable and unlikely to recoup anything beyond the most modest of budgets. The recovery of the genre to a point of consistent marginality, punctuated by occasional mini-revivals prompted by box office successes (*Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Unforgiven* (1992) sparked one such revival), in any case renders the question of the damage done to the western by *Heaven’s Gate* somewhat redundant.

However, if *Heaven’s Gate* did not kill off the western, it did signal a rather more definitive end to the particular kind of auteur-led, revisionist westerns associated with the Hollywood

Renaissance, to the movement which saw American Authenticity emerge as a definitive thematic preoccupation. ‘To many,’ writes Peter Biskind, ‘it seemed like *Heaven’s Gate* had rung down the curtain on New Hollywood’ (1998:401), its failure confirming to studios the need to regain control from a generation of increasingly profligate auteurs. *Heaven’s Gate* found itself caught between two incompatible eras: on the one hand a revisionist western, with the script for the film, then titled *The Johnson County War*, dating back to 1971, the height of the Hollywood Renaissance (Bach, 1985:139); and on the other hand, with its extravagant spectacle and obsessive attention to period detail far beyond requirements of narrative, it exhibited many features that would soon come under the umbrella of postmodernism. The internal contradictions of *Heaven’s Gate*, considered alongside the role of authenticity in postmodernism, offer a key to understanding what was at stake in the western during the Hollywood Renaissance, lending that era a sense of an end and ushering in a successive and markedly differentiated period for Hollywood, for the western, and for American Authenticity. To conclude this thesis, I argue that between the postmodern moment represented by Jameson and the absence of the western there is a ‘structure of feeling’, a resonance indicative less of a clean break, than the tipping point of long term shift in the conception of authenticity in American culture.

Among the aspects of modernism to which postmodernism is openly hostile – as opposed to those features which it merely continues or intensifies – authenticity, anchored in the individuality of the modern subject, is surely at the very centre. But while the claim that postmodernism is necessarily ‘post-authentic’ has a ring of truth about it, authenticity cannot be so straightforwardly understood as having been killed off or forgotten. As I have stressed throughout this thesis, authenticity is always defined by its absence; to mourn this absence within postmodernism would only amplify a distinctively modern malaise. What changes within postmodernism therefore, is not so much authenticity, as the antithetical conditions which produce that ideal as a desire or effect. Jameson argues that ‘concepts such as anxiety and alienation are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern,’ listing authenticity as one of the key ‘depth models’ challenged by post-structural theoretical discourse (1991:14): ‘The existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity whose heroic

or tragic thematics are closely related to the other great opposition between alienation and disalienation, itself equally a casualty of the postmodern period' (1991:12).

The ideal of the authentic depends upon a unified and coherent conception of the self from which one can be alienated and consequently an objective condition of inauthenticity to which one can be opposed. As David Harvey writes, 'we can no longer conceive of the individual as alienated in a classical Marxist sense, because to be alienated presupposes a coherent rather than a fragmented sense of self from which to be alienated' (1989:53). Within postmodernism this essentially modern or Enlightenment subject based upon 'a conception of the human person as a fully centred, unified individual, endowed with capacities of reason, consciousness and action, is thought to have been succeeded by a distinctively postmodern subject understood as having 'no fixed, essential, or permanent identity' but rather adopting 'different identities at all times' (Hall, 1992:277). The 'modern malaises'¹³⁰ which Charles Taylor defines as giving rise to notions of authenticity within Western societies have not been miraculously cured, but rather the postmodern subject no longer recognises their symptoms. 'The most startling fact about postmodernism,' Harvey writes, is its 'total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic that formed half of Baudelaire's conception of modernity' (1989:44). Authenticity is fundamentally redefined in postmodernism by this acceptance of the conditions of modernity by the postmodern subject whose freedom, in Terry Eagleton's damning critique, 'consists of a kind of mining of the fact that there are no longer any foundations at all, and who is therefore at liberty to drift, either anxiously or deliriously, in a universe which is itself arbitrary, contingent, aleatory [...]' (1996:41). For the postmodern subject, authenticity is no longer understood as a problem; if something resembling American Authenticity were desired, it could be achieved instantaneously by thought or affectation.

The challenge that postmodern subjectivity poses to the modern ideal of authenticity is underpinned by the decline in that subject's sense of history. 'In the postmodern,' Jameson claims, 'the past itself has disappeared' (1991:309). The historicity that defines the revisionism of the Hollywood Renaissance western, in which the past is used in order to think historically about the present and vice versa, is thought to have disappeared within postmodernism, despite the pervasiveness of images of the past. As David Harvey writes, postmodernism 'abandons all sense of

historical continuity and memory, while simultaneously developing an incredible ability to plunder history and absorb whatever it finds there as some aspect of the present' (1989:54). This crisis of historicity, according to Jameson, leads to the 'schizophrenic temporality' of a depthless and infinite present, in which images of the past operate within the 'blank parody' of pastiche as pure 'historicist' spectacle (1990:18-21). At the outset of this thesis I argued that authenticity is a cultural effect of modernising societies in which ideals shaped by contemporary anxieties are projected back onto an historical understanding of the pre-modern. If the transition to postmodernity (or late capitalism, a postindustrial society, the information age, or other synonymous epithets) is defined as the completion of the processes of modernisation, the sense that 'everything has reached the same hour on the clock of development or rationalization,' (Jameson, 1990:310), then authenticity loses its central drama. The western has as its historical referent the tipping point of a specifically American process of modernisation. It is therefore the historicity of the genre – the resonance between the dilemmas of a mythologised historical modernisation and the present historical moment – that make it the privileged vehicle for notions of authenticity in American culture. The moment that the pre-modern finally disappears from view, described in the previous chapter by the emergence of the New West in the 'post-western,' American Authenticity lacks an object to mourn and loses the site of its imagination.

"The Poetry of America": History and Spectacle in Heaven's Gate

The tension in *Heaven's Gate* between historicity and historicism, between a rhetoric of revisionism and an emphasis on spectacle, between American Authenticity and the lesser common usage of 'authenticity,' make the film thoroughly representative of the break thought by postmodernism's commentators to have occurred within American culture during the preceding decade. As it is possible to view *Heaven's Gate* as both the final flowering of the Hollywood Renaissance western and as the first western as spectacular postmodern costume drama, these two aesthetic dimensions are worth considering separately.

The revisionist western proposes to 'set the record straight' and offer us the 'real thing,' altering the genre's relation to American history and codifying contemporary concerns by modifying

certain assumed generic conventions. Yet, as I have argued throughout this thesis, the formal politics of revisionism are motivated not simply by historical critique, but by an often conflicted attempt to locate and mourn the possibility for authenticity denied realisation by that history, be it the nascent democracy of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, the meaningful action and loyalty in *The Wild Bunch*, or the symbiotic native community of *Little Big Man*. The historicity of the revisionist western lies in its manner of dramatising and explicitly commenting upon historical change (“those days are closing fast”), of demonstrating a reflexive and critical awareness about the difficulty or impossibility of accessing a truthful history (“print the legend”), of finding parallels or drawing connections between the present and the past, and of encouraging the spectator’s active ‘reading’ of the film in relation to the traditions of the genre. By these criteria, *Heaven’s Gate* constitutes the revisionist western ‘in its fully blown, even definitive form’ (Langford, 2003:32). Cimino’s epic contains all of the hallmarks of violent ‘mud and rags’ Hollywood Renaissance revisionism, but adds the hitherto largely unexplored themes of class and ethnicity, as a range war plot familiar from *The Virginian* (1929, 1946) and *Shane* (1953), and is refigured as the state sanctioned ethnic cleansing of largely Eastern European (also Irish, French, and Russian) immigrants by wealthy cattle barons of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, who effectively govern the territory by force. When the cavalry arrive all too late during the climactic battle sequence, it is not on the side of the peasant farmers, but rather to rescue the mercenaries hired by the cattle company, whose flag is carried alongside the stars and stripes. *Heaven’s Gate* is ‘legible,’ argues Barry Langford, ‘primarily as a critical rejoinder to the western tradition’ and it is through this ‘rewriting’ that the film conveys its critique of a ‘conflicted society marked by enormous imbalances of power and wealth’ in which violence is a ‘coercive requirement’ inflicted with the complicity of the state by the ‘powerful upon the powerless, bespeak the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate critique of contemporary Establishment America’ (2003:33).

The historicity and revisionist critique of *Heaven’s Gate* is achieved in part by subverting generic expectations (expectations which could hardly be guaranteed given the overall decline of the genre and the preponderance of revisionist westerns over the preceding decade), and partly by a narrative structure which, like *Liberty Valance* and *Little Big Man*, encourages the spectator to

actively contrast markedly different historical periods and cultures. The extravagant Harvard prologue set in 1870 introduces a wealthy and privileged class with a distinctly old world feel (accentuated by the undisguised use of Mansfield College and other famous Oxford locations) where James Averill (Kris Kristofferson) and Billy Irvine (John Hurt) graduate in an air of complacent conservative optimism amidst lavishly orchestrated rituals of marching, dancing, and playfighting. We move without prompting to Wyoming, twenty years later, to a vision of a bustling, crowded and booming West, where the 'tired, poor, huddled masses' of agrarian immigrants are shown clinging to the outside of a train in search of a better life. In Wyoming the culture of Harvard is found in the opulent clubhouse of the Stock Grower's Association, where its members, including a melancholy and alcoholic Billy ("I'm a victim of my class"), conspire to rid the county of its immigrant farmers. Averill, a county marshal, and the film's belated hero, mediates between these two cultures, enjoying the material benefits of his class (an empty first class carriage, a private room in the bunkhouse, a luxury carriage as a gift for Isabelle Huppert playing town madam, Ella), yet protecting the immigrants from the Association's mercenaries.

There is more however to the method of *Heaven's Gate* than merely exposing the inequality and abuse of power along class lines normally suppressed within a Turnerian vision of an integrative social development of the West. As Robin Wood argues in his thorough defence of the film, the attitude towards Harvard culture '[...] is never spelled out for us, but only becomes evident retrospectively from the film's overall structure' (2003:279). A second viewing, denied to most spectators for decades following the film's abortive release, reveals links between the film's major set pieces that might otherwise seem indulgent spectacle: the 'Blue Danube' waltz becomes the rollerskating sequence in the titular assembly hall; the playfight in which concentric circles of students attempt to grab a wreath becomes the protracted battle sequence; and these links are reinforced by recurrent circular motifs in composition and staging and by leitmotifs on the soundtrack (the melodies of 'John Brown's Body' and 'The Blue Danube' especially recur with different instrumentation throughout the film). The connection between the two battle sequences is straightforwardly ironic (a geometrically simple mock battle played for fun in which Averill wins fairly obviously foreshadows the cacophonous, morally confused, disorientating, and depressing

defeat in the real battle) but it is in the connection between the two dances, from the lawns of Harvard to Sweetwater's assembly hall, that Cimino's concern with the now-outdated notion of American Authenticity reveals itself.

The rollerskating sequence, comprised of three movements totalling nearly ten minutes of screen time, has very little function in terms of the development of linear narrative. (It is preceded by an equally superfluous scene in which Ella bathes nude in the sun-dappled water of a river as Averill naps on the bank; an unabashedly romantic erotic interlude, teetering towards cliché, and somewhat incongruous tonally). Unlike Wyatt Earp and Clementine's dance in the unfinished church in *My Darling Clementine*, which similarly shows the bonding of a community and the tentative formation of a romantic couple, the dance, like the preceding romantic interlude, has no discernible role to play in the progression of the plot. Its meaning can only be derived from its incongruous tone in relation to the rest of the film and by recognising the reconfiguration of the dance from the prologue. In the Harvard dance, visually echoing the ballroom sequence in Luchino Visconti's *The Leopard* (1963), couples in formal dress waltz in tight circles, part of the wider movement of the crowd circling a tree in the centre of the lawn in strictly regimented spectacle of high cultural ritual. Whereas in the rollerskating sequence, in Wood's description, 'the participants wear a wide variety of clothing, classless in its connotations; their movements [...] are freely inventive and spontaneous, conforming to no predetermined patterns and expressing individual creativity within a community of equals' (2003:278). Throughout the dance Cimino picks out individuals shown throughout film in poverty, anguish, and conflict and briefly unites them into a utopian organic ethnic community. 'Heaven's Gate' (through which only the rich cannot enter), later becomes the site of an 'attempt to found an embryonic democratic/co-operative society to oppose the land barons' (Wood, 2003:278). This glimpse of an authentic society is denied a fully justified place within the narrative as the possibility of its realisation is already foreclosed within history; just as the dance at Harvard is recapitulated, so too must be the battle.

The townspeople disperse too quickly as if evaporating within a dream, and Ella and Averill are left in the hall, empty but for the band, who play a waltz redolent of Appalachian folksong for the couple. Here the allusion to Visconti's *The Leopard* runs deeper, with Ella and Averill recalling Burt

Lancaster and Claudia Cardinale's erotically charged waltz in which the utopian possibility represented by the union of their respective social classes in *Risorgimento* Italy is alive, but only – in the full knowledge of history – for the duration of the dance. Ella and Averill step out of the hall on to the banks of an icy lake at twilight, in one of Vilmos Zsigmond's richly melancholic 'magic hour' landscapes, where Ella once again refuses to flee the impending war. Under different circumstances, Cimino seems to suggest, Averill and Ella might have embodied a new order, and *Heaven's Gate* might have seen the formation of an integrated participatory democracy capable of defying class divides and resisting the violent domination of a state sponsored elite. But Cimino is too cynical about American history to articulate precisely what American Authenticity might look like outside of these suspiciously earned romantic interludes – which although certainly sincere, must be understood within implicit quotation marks, as if they were too fragile to exist within the depressing diegesis of the film – and more interested in the mourning and indignation which follow its inevitable destruction. As Wood concludes, *Heaven's Gate* is 'an elegy for a possible alternative America destroyed before it could properly exist by forces generated within, yet beyond the control of, democratic capitalism' (2003:281). In this sense, the film returns to the anguished and tragic vision of an America betrayed which defined the pursuit of authenticity in the late sixties (in *Easy Rider* and *The Wild Bunch* especially), with the crucial difference being the lack of urgency provided by the resonance between the social movements of that era and the history represented on screen. Without that urgency, the film stands accused of wallowing in its depressiveness, encouraging what Naomi Greene calls 'a kind of voluptuous pessimism' (1984:34), an apt description for the film's epilogue which sees Averill adrift off Rhode Island in a luxury yacht at the turn of the century, silently mourning Ella.

There is a disparity within *Heaven's Gate* between this critical, albeit overwhelmingly elegiac, mode of historical revisionism, and Cimino's obsessive interest in beauty, spectacle, and period detail, with what he termed tritely while scouting for locations, "the poetry of America" (Bach, 1985:176). Much of the film is less a search for American Authenticity as a state of being or social possibility than a search for an aesthetic dimension capable of transcending history itself, for an aesthetic of authenticity that might compensate for the inevitable failure of any politics of authenticity. Any number of scenes selected at random would effectively illustrate this point.

Consider, for instance, the low panning shot of a long line of immigrants trudging wearily through a cloud of dust under a vast sky (Fig. 36); the lingering shot of Casper's main street, delicately craning upwards to reveal countless extras, horses and carriages, period storefronts, and wood smoke reaching up to the forest in the background (Fig. 37); or the shot of the Irish stationmaster, about to be cruelly executed for sport, being woken on the top of a hill, with shadows sweeping across an incomprehensibly vast landscape of the Rockies in the background (Fig.38). In each case an obsessive attention to detail and a perfectionist approach to composition threatens to overwhelm or appears totally at odds with narrative content.¹³¹

Stanley Cavell's remarks about Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978) – a film that bears comparison to *Heaven's Gate* in its threadbare love triangle plot set against the poverty of immigrant agricultural workers in the West, with an equal fixation on capturing 'magic hour' wonder over matters of story – that 'anyone who has taken an interest in the film wishes to understand what its extremities of beauty are in service of' (1980:xiv). The same could also be asked of *Heaven's Gate*: what motivation underlies the aestheticisation of poverty and suffering, in finding the "poetry of America" in the darkest recesses of its history? In *Days of Heaven*, Cavell finds a 'metaphysical vision of the world,' a transcendental style acknowledging film's photographic basis which formally invokes a Heideggerian sense of 'illuminated, radiant, self-manifestation' (1980:xv). Here we can return to the question of authenticity in postmodernism, as Cavell's reading of Malick recalls Jameson's influential discussion of Van Gogh's 'A Pair of Shoes' which he argues evoke, 'the object world of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty, and the whole rudimentary human world of backbreaking peasant toil, in a world reduced to its most banal, menaced, primitive and marginalized state' (1990:7). A description befitting, for instance, the scene in *Heaven's Gate* in which Averill encounters a woman pulling a cart containing among her few possessions, the crumpled body of her badly beaten husband. To this raw material, Jameson suggests, Van Gough adds a transformative explosion of colour, 'a utopian gesture, an act of compensation which ends up producing a whole new realm of the senses' (1984:7). Alternatively, Jameson relates Heidegger's reading of the painting, in which the 'illustrious peasant shoes recreate about themselves the whole missing object world which was once their lived context' (1984:8). It is possible to understand the dichotomy between visual

beauty and rural poverty in *Heaven's Gate* along similar lines, as an act of transformative compensation, or as the vivid and ennobling evocation of a forgotten peasant world.

However, these arguments about the representation of objects in modernist painting do not easily transpose onto film, and more convincing and relevant to *Heaven's Gate* is the successive argument about the commodity fetishism and crisis of historicity in postmodern art represented by Andy Warhol's 'Diamond Dust Shoes.' Unlike Malick, Cimino exhibits no interest in the random intrusions of nature into the image, striving instead to bring everything from the landscape to the smallest minutiae under his obsessive control. In the absence of the American Authenticity the film mourns but can barely articulate within the narrative or conceive within history, Cimino relentlessly pursues an authenticity of period details and verisimilitude. The 'maniacal rage for authenticity' (Langford, 2003:33), that demanded the routing of a period locomotive through five states at the cost of \$150,000, the installation of an irrigation system on the battlefield to promote the growth of grass, the 1.3 million feet or 220 hours of film printed, among numerous other extravagances, puts the money unignorably on the screen. 'The American imagination,' Umberto Eco wrote in 1975, 'demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake' (1998:8). No commercial western can avoid contributing to the commodification of western history, and realism always involves a certain amount of artifice, but *Heaven's Gate* bares its extravagant artifice so proudly, it risks fetishizing surface detail over meaning, and eliciting only sensory overload or objectless affective euphoria on the part of the spectator.

The incoherence of *Heaven's Gate* is that it does not realise that its relentless pursuit of a reified aesthetic of authenticity – in large part contributing to the overspending which condemned the film at the box office – contradicts the film's interest in locating the precise moment in which the dream of an alternative America faded. This contradiction effectively illustrates what Jameson's claim about the crisis of historicity and emergence of 'historicism' in postmodern culture, in which 'the past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles' and the representation of historical content is superseded by 'stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image' (1990:18-9). The surfeit of material culture and excessive weight afforded to spectacle in *Heaven's Gate* make it unavoidably a part of the process in postmodernism through which history, according to Robert

Hewison, 'becomes a contemporary creation, more costume drama and re-enactment than critical discourse' (1987:135). However, *Heaven's Gate* is plainly no historicist pastiche of the western; instead we might say it represents an emergent historicism, or the pursuit of American Authenticity at breaking point.

After Authenticity

The formal incoherence of *Heaven's Gate* and the subsequent near-half decade absence of the western from cinemas set against a decisive shift in American culture which saw modern dilemmas embraced as constitutive features of a new postmodern condition, would appear to indicate a catastrophic failure in the genre's capacity to speak to the anxieties and hopes of the period. To this point the western had proved an enduringly relevant and malleable form because the modern dilemmas that comprised its core thematics or 'shifting antinomies,' were at once timeless and timely, offering a useable history with which to work through contemporary issues. In a postmodern age in which it is thought that the processes of modernisation are complete, that the wilderness of the pre-modern has finally disappeared, that the tethers to history have been severed, and that centred individual subjectivity has given way to the flux of shifting postmodern identities, the western loses its vocation. In postmodernism, authenticity is everywhere and nowhere at once; fundamentally undermined and discredited, yet continually proclaimed in the reified language – or jargon, as Adorno would say – of advertising.

This explains why the years 1980-84 cannot be characterised as a *crisis* of authenticity, another conjuncture which might have sparked mass cultural investment in traditional notions of American Authenticity (and therefore the impetus for another concerted revival of the western); there is no longer any consensus about authenticity being lost. The 'sense of an ending' that connects *Heaven's Gate* and intellectual critiques of postmodernism is not so much a sudden crisis of authenticity, but rather the recognition of the fragmentation and fading-out of the specific conception of American Authenticity which animated many westerns since the early 1960s. Seen from a wide historical perspective, the fade-out of the western in the early 1980s is not a discrete phenomenon, but

explicable as the denouement or aftermath to the mass cultural concern with the problem of authenticity throughout the 1960s.

In Chapter One, I argued that periods of intense modernisation or conflict in American society have given rise to cultural investment in the frontier, not simply as a source of national pride or material resources, but as the site – as much intellectual as geographical – of high ideals designed in opposition to social life in the United States. A distinctive cultural and intellectual current, running parallel to the mainstream myth of the frontier, comprised of acute historical consciousness, opposition to mainstream politics, and the projection of redeemed and disalienated selves onto a temporally dislocated West, periodically emerges as it is pulled into focus by contemporary crises. The defining strategy of this current is the creation of a hypothetical nation, what Whitman termed the ‘real genuine America,’ located in some irretrievable past, capable of resolving the abject conditions of life in the contemporary United States and realising its professed ideals of moral individualism, democracy and freedom. This tragic dream of better lives within a better nation is moulded and snapped into focus at certain flashpoints or conjunctures throughout history, with the pressures of each conjuncture lending the persistent ideal of authenticity a distinctive emphasis. The intellectual movement of American transcendentalism in the mid-nineteenth century represents an influential expression of this current, defining and shaping its contours in American literature. The emergence of the United States as a modern global power, the elevating of the frontier to the level of national mythology in historiography, the popularity of the West in new forms of popular entertainment – all contained, I argue, in the conjuncture of the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893 – allowed for American Authenticity to move from the eccentric high cultural interests of Thoreau and Emerson into an emergent mass culture.

In 1962 the western – a genre in crisis – has its modernist moment, epitomised by *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, as a cycle of films anticipating the Hollywood Renaissance begin to articulate authenticity as a problem within contemporary society and history, bringing longstanding currents to the surface, but responding with autumnal melancholy, unable to share in the optimism that alienation and inauthenticity might be overcome. By the time industrial conditions in Hollywood allowed for a new generation of filmmakers to develop, the collective idealism that defined the pursuit

of authenticity in the early years of the 1960s had collapsed; arriving too late to join the optimism of the folk revival or early New Left, the Hollywood Renaissance from its inception faced the aftermath of the sixties. In the latter half of Chapter Two, I argue that the vectors of American Authenticity within the western boom of the Hollywood Renaissance were shaped by two contrasting yet interlinked social forces: by the ideologically ambiguous appropriation of the West by the popular counterculture, and by the mourning and rage that followed another wave of demoralising and traumatic events between 1968 and 1970. Nowhere is this contradiction more visible than in the *The Wild Bunch* and *The Last Movie*, both of which strive to expose the history and mythology of the frontier as rotten to the core, but in doing so betray a corresponding yearning for the unrealised possibility for American Authenticity, the anger and the mourning only intensified by how quickly and inevitably the dreams of the preceding half decade were betrayed.

This thesis argues that the crisis of authenticity in American culture of the sixties constitutes the last great adventure of authenticity in American culture; pulled into focus by political movements at the beginning of the decade and fuelled by the popular counterculture, a longstanding intellectual current exploded into a full blown mass cultural preoccupation, with the western as its privileged vehicle. But the journey from renewed idealism, hope and social commitment, to disaffection, cynicism and fragmentation traceable through the history of the New Left was remarkably short, and one in which Hollywood not only lagged behind, but failed to fully participate. As I argue in Chapters Three and Four, the Hollywood Renaissance was better positioned to examine the aftermath of the largely failed pursuits of authenticity in the sixties, to survey the wreckage, to test alternatives, and eventually, to restore a sense of authenticity on fundamentally altered terms.

In the seventies, a hopeful and collective politics of authenticity is succeeded by pragmatic single-issue and identity politics. The dream of American Authenticity persists in a mood of diminished expectations, becoming both more inward and backward looking, and wallowing in an air of self-pitying tragedy. Those westerns not entirely given over to the insistent meaninglessness, cynicism, violence, and squalor of the ‘mud and rags’ strain of revisionism are marked by wandering, ‘unmotivated’ narratives of retreat in pursuit of impossible spaces where authenticity might be realised: the search for an irretrievable domestic rural idyll in *The Hired Hand*; the solipsistic pursuit

of primitivistic spiritual revival and absolute wilderness in the Mountain Man cycle; the projection of countercultural communal authenticity onto Native Americans doomed to extermination in *Little Big Man*; the struggle of the rodeo cowboy attempting to excavate within arenas an authentic quality of existence against the continual destruction of the New West; and finally, we might add, the scarcely credible glimpse of utopian community in *Heaven's Gate*.

The strain and contradiction involved in restoring the cowboy hero for the Reagan era in *The Electric Horseman*, *Bronco Billy*, and *Urban Cowboy*, and the absence of the western post-*Heaven's Gate* would seem to indicate an exhaustion of the genre and the pursuit of authenticity; an end as it were, to the long aftermath of the sixties. But the story does not simply end here. I have argued throughout this thesis that authenticity is created as an effect of loss and one of the peculiar consequences of the demise of the western in the early 1980s is that the form itself becomes imbued with a kind of textual authenticity within a postmodern culture with a predilection for nostalgic pastiche. It is no coincidence that the first major western after *Heaven's Gate* is *Silverado* (1985), Lawrence Kasdan's highly self-conscious homage to the ailing genre, in Steve Neale's terms a 'neo-traditional' western (2002:33), which assumes nostalgic desire for the good old days of classical genre on the part of its audience. Similarly, David Pierson, writing about Turner Network Television's Made-for-TV westerns in the 1990s, argues that these films attempt to recover a sense of generic purity by 'locating their authenticity in their origins, settings, performances, themes, and iconography' (2003:57). These socially constructed 'authenticity markers' (Pierson, 2003:60), indicate nostalgia on the part of the audience for certain values and discourses thought to reside within the classical western, but moreover nostalgia for the genre itself.

Within an increasingly eclectic, hybridised and ephemeral postmodern culture, an opposite force is generated, as classical genre is rewritten as a rhetorical reassurance of authenticity. This mode of genericity, reacting against irony and hybridization, exemplified by *Dances With Wolves*, the first major blockbuster western after *Heaven's Gate*, is termed by Jim Collins the 'new sincerity.' Kevin Costner's 'going native' epic, which revives the tropes of the Vanishing American and the Noble Savage, has the protagonist John Dunbar discover authenticity, according to Collins, in an 'as-yet to be contaminated folk culture of elemental purity and as the site of successful narcissistic projection'

(1993:259). But the “harmony” that Dunbar finds among the Lakota refers not only to the tribe but to *genre* as the film foregrounds the “ur-textual,’ in which an originating text takes on a quasi-sacred function as the guarantee of authenticity’ (1993:259). Alongside these nouveau-classical films, in which a predominantly textual form of authenticity is constructed, ongoing forms of revisionism concerned with redressing traditional representations in the genre might be understood as a refocussing of American Authenticity through the lenses of gender or race, wherein the projection of ideals onto the past is rendered all the more problematic. Maggie Greenwald’s *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993) for instance, exposes through the blurring of gender roles on the levels of identification and representation, how supposedly universal ideals expressed through the frontier are unavailable to women and ethnic or racial minorities, dramatising in Jo’s pastoral homestead, where she lives secretly with her Chinese lover ‘a fleeting utopian moment outside of history’ (Campbell, 2000:93).

Charting the persistence, interrogation, and reinvention of American Authenticity from the mid-1980s to the present is clearly beyond the scope of the present work, but the manner in which trends within the genre in the 1990s can be understood within the framework and narratives of this thesis indicates the work left to be done. It is unlikely, however, that the concept of American Authenticity would prove as useful in understanding the meaning, appeal, and historical relevance of the western genre in its present marginal – albeit enduringly resilient – condition within an increasingly globalised Hollywood, as it has been for the conflicted and vital period discussed here. Authenticity becomes the central theme, preoccupation, and problem within a significant majority of westerns produced between 1962 and 1984 as the consequence of a unique conjuncture which one might break down in summation to five indispensable and successive factors:

- (a) An historical crisis or period of intense change prompting reflection on the identity and meaning of the nation;
- (b) Popular consensus about the sources of inauthenticity and alienation in contemporary society; cultural and political investment in authenticity as an antidote;
- (c) A space both ontological and epistemological onto which authenticity can be projected;
- (d) A genre with the capacity to articulate, historicise, and dramatisise the problem of authenticity both directly and allegorically;

- (e) That the popularity of the genre allows for its rewriting in relation to contemporary structures of feeling and longstanding traditions to be understood by its audience.

In the sixties, the chain connecting these factors allowed for the last great crisis of authenticity in American culture to find privileged expression within the Hollywood western, charging the form with contemporary hopes and anxieties, while plugging the genre into a longer narrative of oppositional thought and culture in the United States. Yet, as the last great experiment in American Authenticity declares itself a failure, as an ideal tangible only at the moment of its vanishing, the period is defined by the breakdown of the conditions which allowed it come into focus. By 1984 there is no longer any consensus about inauthenticity as a problem, or authenticity as an ideal, as such notions are fundamentally challenged; the West itself becomes radically detached from the West of the imagination as it enters the mainstream of American social, economic, and political life; and the western genre loses its popular base.

The recourse to the imagery of the western by George W. Bush in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, lending the forthcoming ‘war on terror’ the morally simplistic appeal of frontier vigilante justice demonstrates, critics have been quick to point out, the continuing and dangerous relevance of the frontier myth to American national identity.¹³² Yet this particular historical crisis failed to produce a significant increase in the production of westerns; it is difficult to map onto the westerns of the early twenty-first century such a clear response to the contemporary historical moment (whether in terms of support or challenges to the latest wave of supposedly regenerative and civilising violence) as is possible during the Hollywood Renaissance. Furthermore, while the events of the early 2000s prompted much reflection on the nature of U.S. foreign policy, it did not provide the catalyst for any substantive interrogation into the meaning of the nation, which in turn might have inspired the conjuring once again of a hypothetical ‘real genuine America’ as an oppositional ideal in popular culture. Neither was there any popular consensus about alienation or inauthenticity, terms which appear archaic in postmodern culture at the turn of the century – as there had been during the counterculture had during the sixties – that might have formed a critical mass capable of sustaining the a western revival as a vehicle for expressing contemporary anxieties and ideals.

The chain of conditions, suggested above, which allowed the westerns of the Hollywood Renaissance to draw upon deep roots in American intellectual culture, channelling the thematics of Thoreau and Emerson, while blowing in the tumult of the historical moment – acting as a vessel of desires, a negative image of dilemmas, and the site of ideological critique – has been somewhat broken. Historical crises and new conjunctures are bound to be understood through the myths and history of the Old West; the Hollywood western persists in diverse forms with all its possibilities open, if largely untapped; and the landscapes of the West, though bound for continuous and potentially threatening change, retain their lure and fascination. The missing adhesive is for the popularity of a genre to meet with a popular set of anxieties or concerns that find special resonance within the form. If authenticity is no longer understood as a problem, if the cowboy no longer functions as a vehicle for dreaming, and if an ideal America can no longer be conceived in opposition to contemporary life, then the relevance and expressiveness of the western during the period discussed here is unlikely to be replicated. But to bemoan the demise of authenticity through the western is also to mimic the key characteristics of the concept as it journeys through culture and history; mourning an ideal state glimpsed only at the moment of its loss, and charting the ongoing pursuit of the unapproachable in America's continuing past, always already disappearing behind the western horizon. American Authenticity is bound to resurface, but it will do so in response to a new set of social and historical circumstances, and it may no longer need the western.



Fig. 36: *Heaven's Gate* (1980)



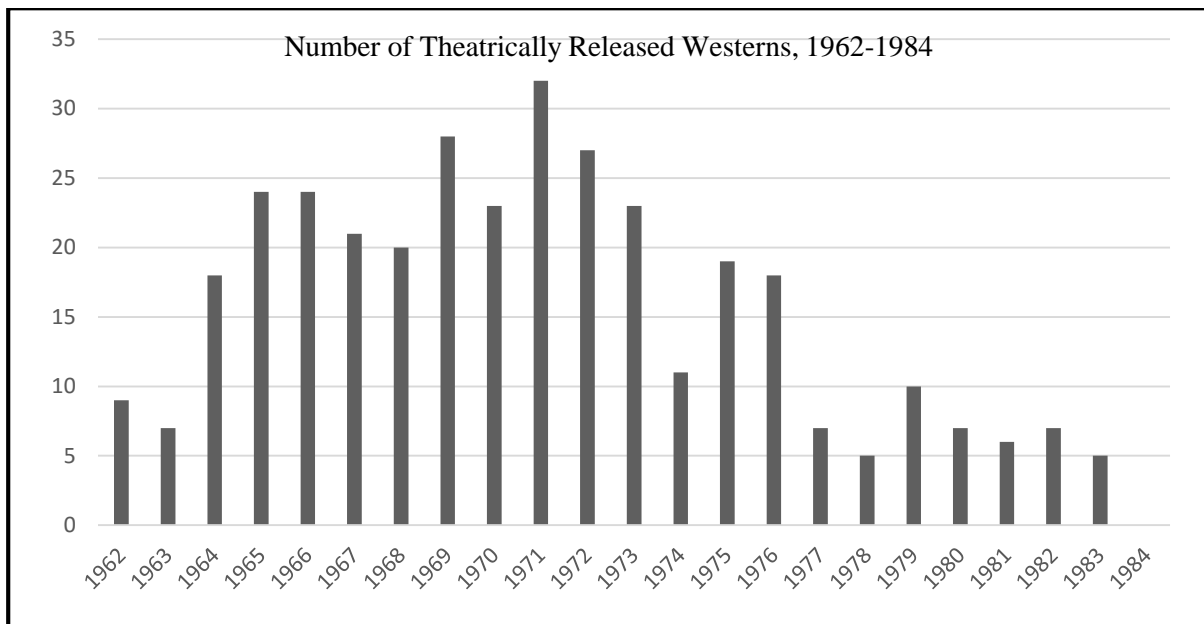
Fig. 37: *Heaven's Gate* (1980)



Fig. 38: *Heaven's Gate* (1980)

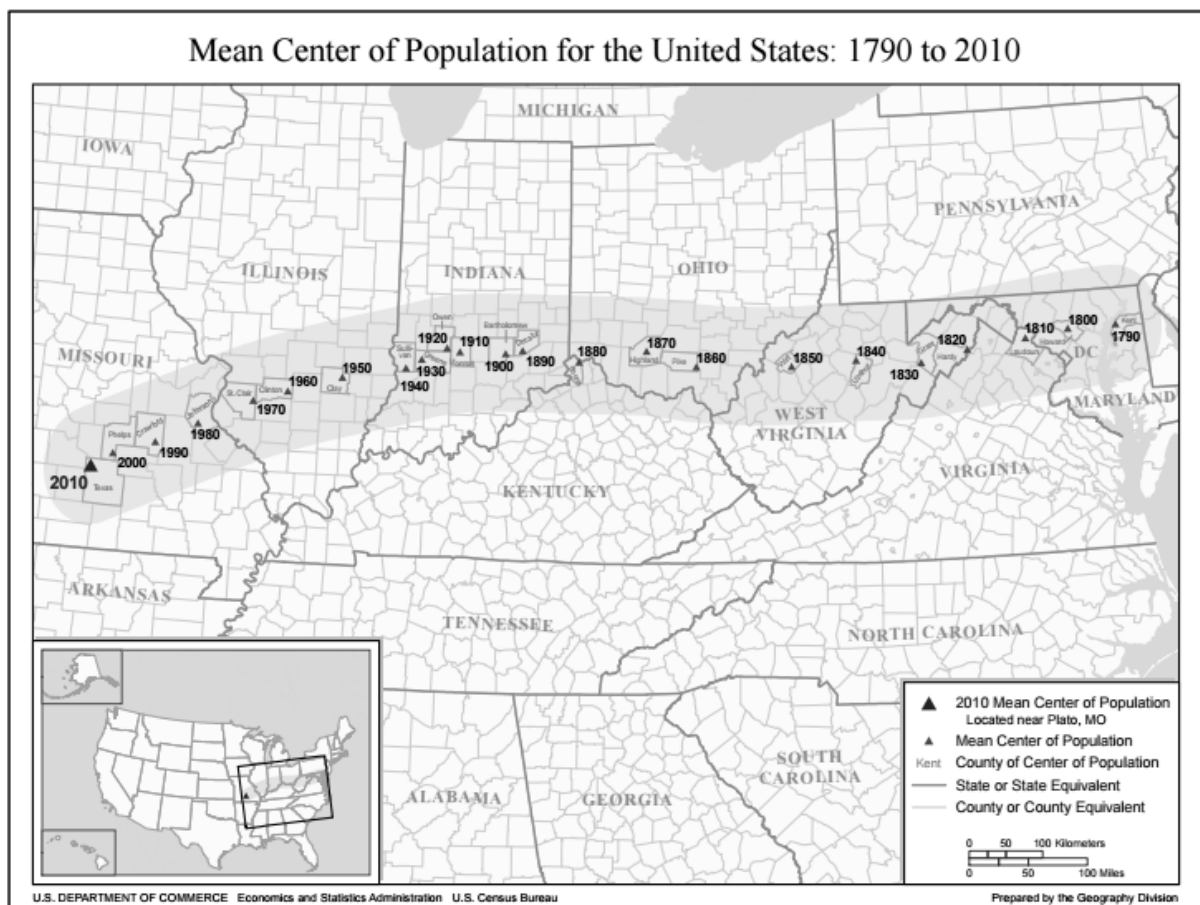
Appendix

Figure A:



Author's graph. Sources: American Film Institute Database, Internet Movie Database

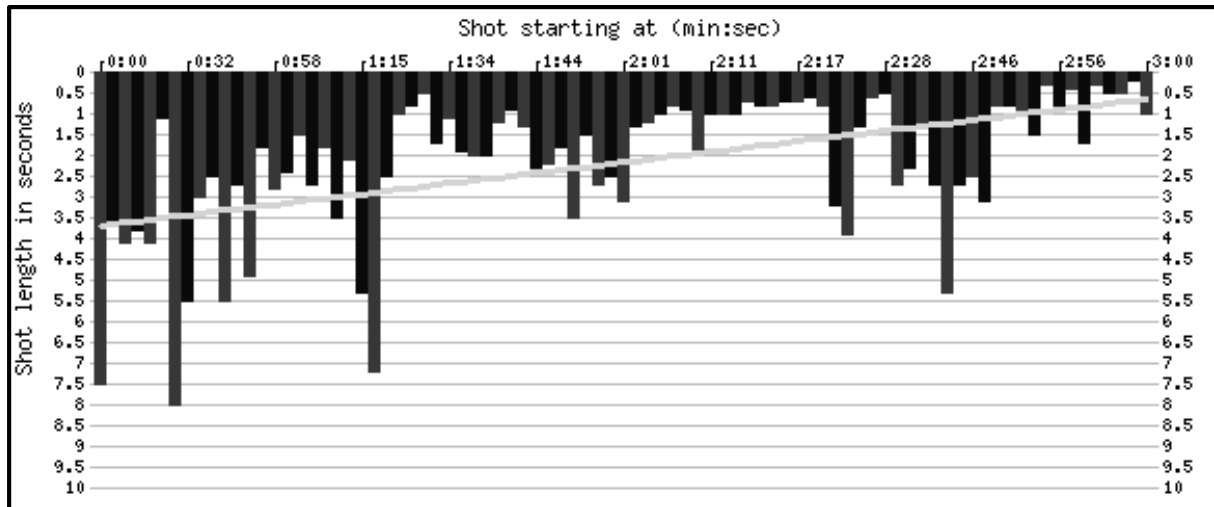
Figure B:



U.S. Census Bureau, accessed online, URL: <http://www.census.gov/geo/reference/centersofpop.html>

Figure C:

Junior Bonner (1972): Bulldozer Montage Sequence Shot Duration



Author's sequence analysis conducted using Cinemetrics software. Data available online, URL:
http://www.cinemetrics.lv/movie.php?movie_ID=17870

¹ See data on the number of western television series on air between 1949-87 in Buscombe (1988:428).

² See Berman (2009:xxvii) and Chapter One, pp.68-9; and Taylor (1991:1-9) and Chapter One, pp.70-1.

³ See Allen and Smith (1997) and Wartenberg (2008:549-556) for an account of different approaches to film and philosophy.

⁴ Adorno refers to the westerns, perhaps unsurprisingly as 'standardized' products of the culture industry and warns against the claim that these 'dregs' of integrated culture might worthy of being called art by virtue of lack of pretence or need for 'cultural legitimization' (1991:160). He does allow however, that the 'technological medium par excellence', is 'intimately related to the beauty of nature' and that in this way film may become art – an observation that recalls the western probably in spite of Adorno's intentions (1991:156).

⁵ There are a considerable number of primary and secondary sources on the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Specific interpretations and information are cited in the text, but my general descriptions have been gleaned from photographs in Bolotin and Laing (2002), original maps from the Encyclopaedia of Chicago, available online, URL: <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/>, and descriptions in Rydell (1984) Gilbert (1993).

⁶ For descriptions of Buffalo Bill's 'Wild West Show and the Congress of Rough Riders of the World' in the Chicago Fair, particularly his omission from the fair proper see Louis S. Warren (2005:417-425) and Erik Larson (2003: 155, 288).

⁷ See John Mark Faragher (1998:2-3); Martin Ridge (1991:7-8).

⁸ On the late nineteenth and early twentieth century influence of Turner's 'frontier thesis' see Gregory H. Nobles (1997:5-16) and Gerald D. Nash (1991:3-30).

⁹ See Lyon (1999:1-2) for an overview of the 'two wests' as an introduction to western literature.

¹⁰ Turnerian interpretations of American history have been challenged by the New Western History movement (see Slotkin, 1985; Limerick, 1987; and White, 1991) for being ethnocentric, the frontier itself demystified as a process of violent imperialism and conquest. Edward Buscombe however has noted however that such critiques of traditional frontier history had already been mounted within the western film, only adding weight to the claim that Turnerian ideas had greater influence on popular culture than historiography (1995:125).

¹¹ See Musser (1994:74).

¹² Warshow also makes the distinction between the existential authenticity of the westerner and a primarily aesthetic authenticity of historical verisimilitude or a nineteenth century photographic style though does not explore the relation between the two in any detail (2004:709).

¹³ See for instance John Saunders, who in a short introduction to the genre claims the *The Great Train Robbery* is the first western, yet begins his own analysis with the revival of the A-western in 1939 (2001:3-5). Kim Newman has argued that 'the Western proper was not possible before the invention of the cinema' (1990:xv-xvi).

¹⁴ For the concept of generic evolution also see Cawelti (2003).

¹⁵ See Wright (1977:40-9).

¹⁶ See for instance Lenihan, (1985:55, 119), Coyne, (1998:66), Wood (1988:85), McGee (2007:32).

¹⁷ The terms is deployed widely in western genre criticism. See Cook, (2002:174-5), Slotkin (1992:520-48, 578-92).

¹⁸ Masculinity has also been interpreted as being problematized and critiqued within the genre. Paul Willeman, for instance, draws on feminist film theory to argue that Anthony Mann's westerns engender an anxious male look in which straightforward identification with the spectacle of masculinity is complicated by a homosexual voyeurism of seeing the male figure 'mutilated and restored through violent brutality' (1981:16). Chris Holmlund has surveyed the various ways in which westerns in the early 1990s attempted – not necessarily successfully – to challenge and redress the genre's codes of masculinity with non-white or female protagonists (2002:53). See also Modleski (1997) and Cook (1988).

¹⁹ Pulp western writer Frank Gruber offers seven paradigmatic western plots: The Union Pacific Story, the Ranch Story, The Empire Story, The Revenge Story, Custer's Last Stand or the Cavalry and Indian Story, The Outlaw Story, and the Marshall Story (Cawelti, 1999:19). One could very easily formulate others, but the point here is that the western, despite its immediately recognisable and ostensibly similar 'outer forms', is actually made up of a wide array of different kinds of stories and authenticity is unlikely to emerge as a concept evenly across this gestalt. Speculatively, authenticity is more likely to resonate within, or be read a central theme in The Ranch Story or the Outlaw Story than the Empire or Custer's Last Stand stories. Either the raw thematic material present in individual plots naturally gives rise to certain concepts, or filmmakers wishing to express themes surrounding the concept are more likely to deploy one kind of plot over another.

²⁰ Tuska for instance mistakes 'shifting antinomies' for 'absolute antinomies' which he decries as a 'blind alley' of 'dialectical thinking', associating Kitses interpretation of the western's thematic potential with Turner's interpretation of history, and in doing so missing the essential ambivalences and subtlety of both (1985:10).

²¹ Buscombe opts for the latter interpretation, suggesting the line expresses 'Doc's own personal judgement on society,' and constitutes 'Ford's final verdict on respectability' (1992:75-6).

²² The oppositions Ray gives are reproduced below. It should be noted that there are not intended as binary oppositions; in the manner of Kitses 'shifting antinomies' they offer a key to some of the thematic oppositions inherent in the film's structure, many of which are problematized or reconciled:

East	West
Ranse	Tom
Train/stagecoach	Buckboard/horse
Lawbook	Gun/whip
Weakness	Strength
Legal system	Private justice
Idealism	Pragmatism
Coffee	Whiskey
Apron	Gunbelt
Shoes	Boots
Words	Action
Mental	Physical
Rose	Cactus rose
Law office/schoolroom	Saloon
Literacy	Illiteracy
Fences	Open range
Statehood	Territory

Community	Individual
Politician	Private man
Conscience	Pride
Married	Unmarried
Fame	Anonymity
Prosperity	Poverty
Life	Death
Civilization	Wilderness

²³ McVeigh draws a more convincing link between *Liberty Valance* and its contemporary social and historical moment, reading the scene in which Pompey ‘forgets’ the line ‘all men are created equal’ in his recital of the Declaration of Independence as ‘clearly a nod towards the civil rights movement’ with Ranse remarking knowingly “a lot of people forget that part” (2009:158). This too however could be subsumed into the film’s broader thematic concern with liberty and equality.

²⁴ The surrealist supreme point is conceived as an ‘inaccessible ideal glimpsed from afar, the attainment of which would constitute the definitive resolution of all human contradictions’ (Browder, 1967:73). The American West had a privileged place within the European Avant-garde as an imagined zone of surrealistic encounters. See Blaise Cendrars’ 1925 novel *Gold* (1982), Nash (1992) and Conrad (1998).

²⁵ ‘I hold it to be impossible that the great monarchies of Europe still have long to last. All have shined, and every state that shined is on the decline’ predicted Rousseau in *Emile* (1979:194). On Rousseau’s pessimistic attitude to historical progress see Jouvenal (1962) and Jay (1984:40-43).

²⁶ Walt Whitman referred to the ‘real genuine America’ in a letter to the New York Times in 1863. He uses the phrase to suggest America’s capitol should be located in the West instead of Washington (2014:266).

²⁷ Albert Bierstadt perhaps epitomises the promotion of Manifest Destiny in landscape painting. See Hughes (1997:194).

²⁸ Water Harding states there is no evidence that Thoreau read Rousseau but supposes he would have disliked his ‘moral laxity’. Thoreau may well have been wholly dismissive of the French Revolution – ‘nothing ever happens in foreign parts, a French revolution not excepted,’ he stated in *Walden* (2004:185) – but this is was owing to his stringent Americanism and desire to distance his own work from the Old World. Whether or not he actually read Rousseau, the point here is the similarities between their thought arising at tumultuous points in their historical situations.

²⁹ On the intellectual background to the establishment of the National Parks see Runte (2002:5-9); on Thoreau’s influence on John Muir see Fox (1981:82-3).

³⁰ ‘John Wayne: *Playboy* Interview’, in *Playboy* May 1971

³¹ The anecdote varies in terms of the extremity of Wayne’s threats, but Gallagher (1989:135), Biskind (1998:123) and Winkler (2011:123) all relay the same basic story.

³² Retained in the Coen brothers’ faithful 2010 adaptation.

³³ Vincent Canby, *The New York Times*, July 4th, 1969.

³⁴ The radicalism of Hopper’s borrowing of techniques from American avant-garde has been called into question. Jonathan Rosenbaum has argued that *Easy Rider* lit the way for New Hollywood’s ‘deradicalised’ or popularised applications of ‘alternative’ film practice (2004:144). David E. James is less generous, seeing New Hollywood’s appropriation of avant-garde techniques as being little more than decorous plagiarisms, typical of Hollywood’s tradition of subsuming avant-garde techniques into commercial realist narrative forms (1989).

³⁵ The Days of Rage were a series of violent demonstrations organised by the Weathermen faction of SDS from October 9-11th 1969 in Chicago, following the Democratic Party National Convention protests in August. See Gitlin (1987) and Varon (2004).

³⁶ Wayne’s main criticism of *Easy Rider* was its ‘glorifying’ of recreational drug use: ‘like in *Easy Rider*, where the guy says “Jesus, don’t you smoke pot” – as if smoking pot is the same as chewing Bull Durham’ in *Playboy* May 1971.

³⁷ Annual production declines from 108 in 1952 to just 15 in 1962, down further to 9 in 1963 (Buscombe, 1988:426).

³⁸ This decline is partly accounted for by the extinction of B-studios like Republic and/or their conversion to television to service the TV-westerns boom.

³⁹ See William H. Chafe (2003:114).

⁴⁰ Gitlin traces the transcendentalism of the Beats and their anticipation of the hippie counterculture from Ginsberg and his invocation of Walt Whitman in 'A Supermarket in California' and the Emersonian conclusion of *Howl* (1987:51).

⁴¹ Sklar (1994:321-3), Cook (2000:xvii), King (2002:12-48), and Langford (2010:107-133) all stress the necessity of understanding the Hollywood Renaissance as a product of industrial crisis as well as social change.

⁴² See Ryan and Kellner's description of *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde* evidencing the 'limits of the sixties version of the alienated white rebellion' and 'cohering perfectly with traditional American individualism' (1988:21).

⁴³ Hollywood in the fifties is best characterised as deeply conflicted, rather than monolithically affirmative or conservative, as the decline of social cinema and the rise of escapist genres in a climate of censorship was met with subversiveness and dissent, often within those same genres. See Biskind (2001), Cohan (1997), Neve (2003), Pomerance (2006).

⁴⁴ See Bazin (2005:149-157).

⁴⁵ See Dyer (2007:117) on the assumptions implicitly made about the classical western by the process of revisionism.

⁴⁶ See also Horowitz (1997:163).

⁴⁷ *The Port Huron Statement* reproduced in Miller (1994:332) Gitlin comments on this passage that it is marked by the 'automatic sexist language of 1962' which indicative of how masculine calls for authenticity tend to be, in the early sixties as in the mid-nineteenth century (1987:108).

⁴⁸ On the limited similarities between New Left and New Right see Lyons (1996:150-5).

⁴⁹ John McMillian argues it is necessary to disentangle the New Left from the wider social and cultural movements of the 1960s that both influenced and grew out of the New Left (2003:5).

⁵⁰ Rossinow (1998:6).

⁵¹ Frankfurt School émigré Erich Fromm's psychoanalytic philosophy called for greater moral individualism and autonomy as early as 1946, declaring in *Man for Himself* that 'man is not a blank sheet onto which culture writes its text' (2013:23), but his ideas reached a far wider audience in the early sixties.

⁵² Quoted in Marcus (1998:20), originally from Shelton (1968:42).

⁵³ Dickstein goes on to contemplate a shift in values from the sincerity of the folk revival to the authenticity of the rock revival. His use of terms sincerity and authenticity differ from mine, derived from Berman, Trilling, Taylor et al. and outlined in Chapter One, but nonetheless, exact definitions aside, Dickstein's work illustrates the importance of such concepts to understanding American culture of the period (1997:191)

⁵⁴ See Patterson (1996:710-42), Mason (2004:77-113), Matusow (2009:395-441).

⁵⁵ Michael Allen has argued that the embrace of the 'Cowboy Code' in popular music proves the versatility of western myth and the turn away from radical politics in the counterculture (2005:276, 280-5).

⁵⁶ See Langford (2010:285) for annual US cinema attendances 1946-2008, Monaco (2003:269) for statistics detailing annual production by the studios 1960-68, 1970 and Thompson and Bordwell (2003:512) for a broader view of the industrial crises of the sixties.

⁵⁷ Paul Schrader, 'Sam Peckinpah going to Mexico' in *Cinema*, Vol.5, No.3, 1969

⁵⁸ As Michael Bliss comments, the combination of excitement and reflection in response to violence simply cannot be guaranteed, but nonetheless seems to be the response Peckinpah sought to elicit (1999:109).

⁵⁹ Peckinpah interviewed by Manny Faber in *Film Quarterly* (1969:9)

⁶⁰ On Robert Ardrey's influence on Peckinpah see Bliss (1999:118-9), Prince (1998:42), Hayes (2008:xii-xiii).

⁶¹ Sharrett (1988:96) offers a survey of these critical prejudices. For an examples of allegorical interpretations of the film see Cook (1981:631) and Slotkin (591-613).

⁶² See Gitlin (1987:360) and Hoberman (2003:251).

⁶³ Peckinpah in Prince: 'We all know that behind our falsely reassuring democratic facades, violence has very deep roots. It has shaped our history, and the whole country knows very well that it has more often solved its problems through violence than through the official channels of democracy.'

⁶⁴ For Pike as an autobiographical character see Weddle (1994:327-338).

⁶⁵ For Winston Wheeler Dixon, it is Peckinpah's concern with 'the collapse of the western, and the concomitant eclipse of the world in which the western existed' that define him as an artist, more than his interest in violence (1999:174).

⁶⁶ 'John Wayne: *Playboy* Interview', in *Playboy* May 1971.

⁶⁷ Dennis Hopper in Wrinkler (2011:188).

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- ⁶⁸ For a comprehensive analysis of Christian symbolism in *The Last Movie* see Burns (1979).
- ⁶⁹ David Denby, 'Visions of the End' in *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1971, p.132.
- ⁷⁰ Andrew Sarris, *The Village Voice*, October 14th, 1971, p.80.
- ⁷¹ Pauline Kael, *The New Yorker*, October 9th, 1971.
- ⁷² Foster Hirsch, 'You're Wrong if you Write Off Dennis Hopper', *The New York Times*, October, 24th, 1971.
- ⁷³ See James Naremore (1985: 8-15, esp. p.13).
- ⁷⁴ J. Hoberman, 'Drugstore Cowboy', *The Village Voice*, August 8th, 2006.
- ⁷⁵ Note how Williams uses 'wildness' as opposed to 'wilderness', following Thoreau in privileging the state of wildness in being, thought or experience over the discovery of wild places.
- ⁷⁶ For an overview see Brinkley (1993:851-873).
- ⁷⁷ Rossinow explores this shift from 'the politics of authenticity' to the 'politics of identity' in detail (1998:335-345).
- ⁷⁸ See Gitlin (1987:425).
- ⁷⁹ Tom Wolfe, 'The Me-Decade and the Third Great Awakening, *New York*, August 23rd, 1976, original emphasis.
- ⁸⁰ On growth of wilderness appreciation and consumer culture in the seventies see Tuner (2002:462-484) and Nash 'The Irony of Victory' (1973:263-288).
- ⁸¹ See especially *The Back Country* (1968) and *Turtle Island* (1974).
- ⁸² Biskend (1998-125-6).
- ⁸³ Fonda in Beverley Walker, 'Go West, Young Man' in *Sight & Sound*, Vol. 41, No.1 (Winter 1971/72). Fonda also idiosyncratically elaborates on the film's classical allegory on the DVD commentary (Tartan Video, 2006).
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁵ See Gallafent: '[*The Outlaw Josey Wales*] expresses the belief in the possibility of a retreat or a withdrawal, or perhaps a refusal' (1994:129).
- ⁸⁶ There is some historical debate as to the number of working cowboys during the cattle boom. See Savage (1979:7). Buscombe estimates 25,000 men made the trip north from 1867-1886, with altogether 50,000 cowboys at work during the height of the boom (1988:100).
- ⁸⁷ McCarthy provides an appendix listing all films featuring mountain men from 1920-1990 (1995:128-9).
- ⁸⁸ Richard Combs, 'Jeremiah Johnson', *Sight & Sound*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Winter 1972-72), p.53.
- ⁸⁹ 'The Wilderness Act', Public Law 88-577, September 3rd, 1964, URL: <http://wilderness.nps.gov/document/wildernessAct.pdf>.
- ⁹⁰ The classic account is Matthiessen (1996). See also Smith (2012:183-219), White (1991:586), Zinn (2005:534-535).
- ⁹¹ Handley cites here Walter Benn Michaels (1995:36).
- ⁹² On Thoreau's interest in Native Americans see Gura (1987). Leslie A. Fiedler (1968) traces white male primitivism or 'going native' back further, notably to French-American writer Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782).
- ⁹³ See Marrubio (2006:173).
- ⁹⁴ Quoted in Friar and Friar (1972:124). Buffy Sainte-Marie wrote and performed the title song for *Solider Blue* (1970).
- ⁹⁵ *Village Voice*, Jun 18th, 1970, p.49.
- ⁹⁶ Quoted in Georgakas (1972:28).
- ⁹⁷ See also King (2002:130), and Kasdan and Tavernetti (2003:131).
- ⁹⁸ Kasdan and Tavernetti *ibid* explore the representation of these two roles in more detail.
- ⁹⁹ See Penn (2008:84).
- ¹⁰⁰ Reported in *The New York Times*, July 24th, 1971.
- ¹⁰¹ 'This movement from cause to effect in the service of overarching goals, partly explains why Hollywood so prizes continuity. Coincidence and haphazardly linked events are believed to flaw the film's unity and disturb the spectator' (Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger, 1985:17).
- ¹⁰² See Lenihan (1980:49), Cook (2000:174), Hoberman (2003:128).
- ¹⁰³ Sandos and Burgess compare this official account, laced with standard Indian-hating assumptions, with the Chemehuevi oral version, criticising how Polonsky further obscures the historical incident, using the Indians as 'foils in his morality play' (2003:117-119).

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- ¹⁰⁴ Polonsky, interview with Joseph McBride, 1980, original emphasis (2012:167).
- ¹⁰⁵ Pauline Kael, 'Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here', *New Yorker*, 27th December, 1969.
- ¹⁰⁶ Aaron Latham, 'The Ballad of Urban Cowboy: America's Search for True Grit', *Esquire* Fortnightly, September 12th 1978, p.25.
- ¹⁰⁷ Pauline Kael, 'The Current Cinema: The Street Western', *New Yorker*, February 25th 1974, p.100.
- ¹⁰⁸ See Langford (2010:125-9), Wood (2003:144-55) and Britton (2009:97-107).
- ¹⁰⁹ Carter's approval rating according to a Gallup poll was just 28% in June 1979, only slightly above Nixon's immediately after Watergate (22%): <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/Presidential-Approval-Ratings-Gallup-Historical-Statistics-Trends.aspx>
- ¹¹⁰ E. Ann Kaplan mentions *Urban Cowboy* as an example films of the period in which men (especially stars like John Travolta) are constructed as sexual objects, with women taking the male role as bearers of the gaze and initiators of action, usually losing their traditionally feminine characteristics in the process (1983:29).
- ¹¹¹ Alan Nadel notes in his study of the Reagan era cinema how Reagan himself 'made little distinction between serving as president and playing a movie role, just as he often merged aspects of movies with bits of autobiography' (1997:8).
- ¹¹² See Savage (1979:118). Marlboro ended their television campaigns in 1970 following the federal 'Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act' which banned the advertising of cigarettes on television and radio.
- ¹¹³ In 1980, 77.5% of the West's population lived in metropolitan areas, compared to 73.7% in the rest of the U.S. In 1940 these figures were 42.8% and 55.2% respectively. See table in Abbott (1993:xix).
- ¹¹⁴ Latham, p.30.
- ¹¹⁵ See Malone and Etulain (241, 250).
- ¹¹⁶ Latham, p.30.
- ¹¹⁷ The theoretical vocabulary here is borrowed from Altman (1984:6-18).
- ¹¹⁸ 'Rodeo Themes in Out-Chute', *Variety*, September 6th, 1972, p. 3, 26.
- ¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹²¹ For the cultural history of rodeo see Allen (1998), Wooden and Ehringer (1996) and Savage (1979:123-36)
- ¹²² See Weddle (2000:431).
- ¹²³ See Boym (2001:xiii-xiv).
- ¹²⁴ See Weddle (2000:15-17, 112-114).
- ¹²⁵ Sonny's endorsement is likely inspired by Tom Mix who similarly endorsed breakfast cereal alongside countless other products in the 1930s (Savage, 1979:116).
- ¹²⁶ There is a reference, surely deliberate, to Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), as Hallie eats a raw carrot by the campfire having grown accustomed to living outdoors.
- ¹²⁷ Vincent Canby, 'Screen: Redford - Jane Fonda Comedy: Cowboy and the Lady', *New York Times*, December 21st, 1979.
- ¹²⁸ Box office data from Box Office Mojo: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=urbancowboy.htm>
- ¹²⁹ See especially Bach (1985), Balio (1987:339-343), Biskind (1998:390-1, 400), and Prince (2002:33-9)
- ¹³⁰ See Chapter One and Taylor (1991:1-9)
- ¹³¹ Steven Bach, somewhat uncharitably, suggests that 'characters and story were sacrificed to the filmmaker's love of visual effect and production for their own sakes' (1985:416).
- ¹³² See McVeigh (2007:213-220) and Langford (2003:34).

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(Note: the following lists only books and academic journals cited in the text and endnotes. Full citations for newspapers, magazines, and other materials are provided in the endnotes).

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Filmography

(Note: the following list contains only films named in the text and endnotes).

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| <i>A Man Called Horse</i> (1970, Elliot Silverstein) | <i>Chisum</i> (1970, Andrew V. McLaglen) |
| <i>Across the Wide Missouri</i> (1951, William A. Wellman) | <i>Citizen Kane</i> (1941, Orson Welles) |
| <i>The Alamo</i> (1960, John Wayne) | <i>Close Encounters of the Third Kind</i> (1977, Steven Spielberg) |
| <i>All That Heaven Allows</i> (1955, Douglas Sirk) | <i>Comes a Horseman</i> (1978, Alan J. Pakula) |
| <i>American Empire</i> (1942, William C. McGann) | <i>Coming Home</i> (1978, Hal Ashby) |
| <i>American Graffiti</i> (1973, George Lucas) | <i>Contempt</i> (1963, Jean-Luc Godard) |
| <i>Apocalypse Now</i> (1979, Francis Ford Coppola) | <i>The Cowboys</i> (1972, Mark Rydell) |
| <i>Bad Company</i> (1972, Robert Benton) | <i>Custer of the West</i> (1967, Robert Siodmak) |
| <i>Bad Day At Black Rock</i> (1955, John Sturges) | <i>Dances With Wolves</i> (1990, Kevin Costner) |
| <i>The Ballad of Little Jo</i> (1993, Maggie Greenwald) | <i>Days of Heaven</i> (1978, Terrence Malick) |
| <i>Big Jake</i> (1971, George Sherman) | <i>Death of a Gunfighter</i> (1969, Don Siegel) |
| <i>The Big Sky</i> (1952, Howard Hawks) | <i>Death Wish</i> (1974, Michael Winner) |
| <i>Black Rodeo</i> (1972, Jeff Kanew) | <i>The Deer Hunter</i> (1978, Michael Cimino) |
| <i>Bonnie and Clyde</i> (1967, Arthur Penn) | <i>Devil's Doorway</i> (1950, Anthony Mann) |
| <i>Boyz N The Hood</i> (1991, John Singleton) | <i>Dirty Harry</i> (1971, Don Siegel) |
| <i>Broken Arrow</i> (1952, Delmer Daves) | "Doc" (1971, Frank Perry) |
| <i>Bronco Billy</i> (1980, Clint Eastwood) | <i>Dodge City</i> (1939, Michael Curtiz) |
| <i>Buffalo Bill & The Indians, Or, Siting Bull's History Lesson</i> (1976, Robert Altman) | <i>Easy Rider</i> (1969, Dennis Hopper) |
| <i>Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid</i> (1969, George Roy Hill) | <i>8½</i> (1963, Federico Fellini) |
| <i>Chato's Land</i> (1972, Michael Winner) | <i>Electra-Glide in Blue</i> (1973, James William Guercio) |
| <i>Cheyenne Autumn</i> (1964, John Ford) | <i>The Electric Horseman</i> (1979, Sydney Pollack) |
| | <i>Fitzcarraldo</i> (1982, Werner Herzog) |

Force of Evil (1947, Abraham Polonsky)
Getting Straight (1970, Richard Rush)
Goin' South (1978, Jack Nicholson)
The Graduate (1967, Mike Nichols)
The Great Train Robbery (1903, Edwin S. Porter)
The Green Berets (1968, John Wayne)
Harold and Maude (1971, Hal Ashby)
Hang 'Em High (1968, Ted Post)
Heaven's Gate (1980, Michael Cimino)
Hello, Dolly! (1969, Gene Kelly)
High Noon (1952, Fred Zinnemann)
High Plains Drifter (1973, Clint Eastwood)
The Hired Hand (1971, Peter Fonda)
The Honkers (1972, Steve Inhat)
How The West Was Won (1962, John Ford, Henry Hathaway, George Marshall, Richard Thorpe)
Hud (1963, Martin Ritt)
The Invaders (1912, Thomas H. Ince)
Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956, Don Siegel)
J.W. Coop (1972, Cliff Robertson)
Jeremiah Johnson (1972, Sydney Pollack)
Jesse James (1939, Henry King)
Junior Bonner (1972, Sam Peckinpah)
Kid Blue (1973, James Frawley)
The Last Movie (1971, Dennis Hopper)
The Last Picture Show (1971, Peter Bogdanovich)
The Leopard (1963, Luchino Visconti)
Little Big Man (1970, Arthur Penn)
Lonely Are The Brave (1962, David Miller)
Lonesome Cowboys (1968, Andy Warhol)
The Long Goodbye (1973, Robert Altman)
The Lusty Men (1952, Nicholas Ray)
Major Dundee (1965, Sam Peckinpah)

The Man In The Gray Flannel Suit (1956, Nunnally Johnson)
Man In the Wilderness (1971, Richard C. Sarafian)
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962, John Ford)
McCabe & Mrs Miller (1971, Robert Altman)
Medium Cool (1969, Haskell Wexler)
Midnight Cowboy (1969, John Schlesinger)
The Misfits (1961, John Huston)
The Missouri Breaks (1976, Arthur Penn)
The Mountain Men (1980, Richard Lang)
My Darling Clementine (1946, John Ford)
Nashville (1975, Robert Altman)
The Outlaw Josey Wales (1976, Clint Eastwood)
Paint Your Wagon (1969, Joshua Logan)
Pale Rider (1985, Clint Eastwood)
Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid (1973, Sam Peckinpah)
Pierrot le Fou (1965, Jean-Luc Godard)
Platoon (1986, Oliver Stone)
Pocket Money (1972, Stuart Rosenberg)
Pursued (1947, Raoul Walsh)
Rancho Notorious (1952, Fritz Lang)
Red River (1948, Howard Hawks)
Rebel Without A Cause (1955, Nicholas Ray)
The Return of a Man Called Horse (1976, Irvin Kershner)
Ride The High Country (1962, Sam Peckinpah)
Rio Lobo (1970, Howard Hawks)
R.P.M. (1970, Stanley Kramer)
Run of the Arrow (1957, Samuel Fuller)
The Scalphunters (1968, Sydney Pollack)
The Searchers (1956, John Ford)
Shane (1953, George Stevens)

The Shooting (1966, Monte Hellman)
The Shootist (1976, Don Siegel)
Soldier Blue (1970, Ralph Nelson)
The Sons of Katie Elder (1965, Henry Hathaway)
Stagecoach (1939, John Ford)
Star Wars (1977, George Lucas)
Superman (1978, Richard Donner)
The Strawberry Statement (1970, Stuart Hagmann)
Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here (1969, Abraham Polonsky)
This Is Cinerama (1952, Merian C. Cooper et al.)
To Kill A Mockingbird (1962, Robert Mulligan)
The Treasure of the Sierra Madre (1948, John Huston)
Triumphs of a Man Called Horse (1983, John Hough)
True Grit (1969, Henry Hathaway)

True Grit (2010, Joel and Ethan Coen)
Two Lane Blacktop (1971, Monte Hellman)
Two Mules for Sister Sara (1970, Don Siegel)
Ulzana's Raid (1972, Robert Aldrich)
The Undefeated (1969, Andrew V. McLaglen)
Unforgiven (1992, Clint Eastwood)
Union Pacific (1939, Cecile B. DeMille)
Urban Cowboy (1980, James Bridges)
The Way West (1967, Andrew V. McLaglen)
The Vanishing American (1925, George B. Seitz)
Vanishing Point (1971, Richard C. Sarafian)
The Virginian (1946, Stuart Gilmore)
Weekend (1967, Jean-Luc Godard)
Western Union (1941, Fritz Lang)
When the Legends Die (1973, Stuart Millar)
The Wild Bunch (1969, Sam Peckinpah)
Zabriskie Point (1970, Michelangelo Antonioni)
Zachariah (1971, George Englund)